

Hollow Metal

Leviathan

The Crimson Dragon

Chapter 1

*We never imagined the
empire's power. We were
helpless against their
Daemons.*

- Yrrek Sgrall: Corvan Soldier

Not many people frequented the Blind Eye Tavern, but those who did were hardened and calloused, who were running away from their lives. It had notoriety for hosting well known criminals and rebels, yet only a courageous (or stupid) officer would try to arrest the people in there. It was certainly a death penalty for any law enforcement of the land to walk in.

Jago Yen Kale stepped into the tavern, his nostrils burning from the putrid smells that emanated from both the drinks and the patrons themselves. His dark eyes flitted back and forth searching the patrons. When he didn't see the person that he was looking for, he scowled and walked up to the bartender, his ragged, crimson cloak carefully covering his inner appearance.

"Barkeep," he said in a low voice, careful not to be overhead, "I need a table; someplace secluded and dark." He handed the barkeeper a fifty Wong note, worth several times more than any drink than they had there.

"You need a drink?" the barkeeper asked.

"If you have a bottle of hate, I'll take it," Jago responded, his voice and eyes ice-cold with pure fury.

The barkeeper took a step back, surprised by the amount of hate in

the man that stood before him. However, he wasn't the first of his kind that he had seen, nor would he be the last.

"You can take that area over there," the barkeeper pointed to a secluded spot in a corner that was barely lit and smelled rotten, "no one will bother you there."

Jago sat down at a table over where the barkeeper pointed, his arms clenched in fury. His short dark hair covered his face as he hunched over, listening carefully to a nearby conversation.

A few feet away, four men talked in hushed voices to each other while they sipped their ale. Their faces showed determination and vengeance. One had scars all up and down his face.

Jago's mouth curved into a dark grin as he found what he was looking for. Rebels. Those who sought to end the Irati Empire. He pressed a button near his wrist, and he could suddenly hear their conversation clearly.

"Blast Skaggs for his impatience!" The scarred man whispered angrily, "If he hadn't taken the Regiment earlier than he was told, Major Oldham wouldn't have been captured!"

"I know," another agreed, "he always was too prideful to admit something had been wrong!"

A third looked at the two who were speaking and shook his head furiously, "Stop it! Both of you! It's bad enough that Skaggs is dead, but to behave this way on the eve of Major Oldham's execution is childish!"

The two looked sheepishly at each other while the fourth interjected, "That's right! We have more important things to discuss."

Jago's grin deepened. His Company had been the one who had taken Major Oldham captive, it was a crushing defeat for the Rebellion. His grin dropped as he focused on the reason why he was there. From his cloak, he pulled out a tablet with a young, flame-haired man's face on it. His expression radiated kindness, something that Jago knew was far from the truth. His hand clenched the tablet furiously. *If they only knew*, he thought. On the tablet, a few words were displayed, reading, *WANTED: LYNN FORSIGTH. DEAD ONLY. REWARD: 5,000,000,000 WONG.*

He got up from his table and approached the four men. Their conversation stopped instantly, and they looked suspiciously at him as he brought out his tablet to show the men.

“Have any of you seen this man?” He demanded.

The four men relaxed. Even among the Rebellion, Lynn was considered a monster.

The scarred one answered, “No we haven't. I'm sure you know as well as we that anyone who approaches that devil is sure to die.”

Jago stared at him intently for a moment and then dropped his gaze. He was telling the truth. Even among the Rebellion, no one had seen Lynn. It was as if he was a nightmare, a shadow, only appearing when death was near.

The scarred men stared at Jago, puzzled. He had seen his face somewhere before, he was sure. “Do I know you?” He asked Jago.

Jago sneered back at the rebel, “No, I have never met you before.”

The scarred man countered, “No, I'm sure I've seen your face before somewhere...” Sudden realization dawned on him as his eyes widened. He saw the crimson and white Imperial Regalia underneath

Jago's cloak.

"Your... Jago Kale! Captain of the Leviathan army! Poster boy for the Empire!"

His three compatriots suddenly drew their weapons, pistols, with the sole purpose of killing Jago. The scarred man's face twisted in rage.

"You're the demon who's sending Major Oldham to his death!" he shouted.

Jago looked around carefully, most of the patrons in the bar were rebel supporters if not rebels themselves, and all had drawn out their weapons as well. He smirked.

"THAT'S RIGHT, SCUM! KILL ME IF YOU CAN, BUT NOTHING IS GOING TO STOP ME BEFORE I KILL THIS MAN!!" He threw back his cloak to show his full military uniform. He was equipped with both a pistol and a phase sword, but he made no motion to pull them out. *I'm not going to waste my time on them*, he thought.

The scarred man fired his pistol and Jago skillfully dodged it, ducking under the sitting man, grabbing his shooting arm, and throwing him into a nearby table. Bullet fire erupted, all trying to take down Jago. Jago dodged all of them with ease, making no effort to protect himself other than to dodge the fire. He readied his fists to attack.

"You fools think that you can beat me?!" He scoffed, "With the Mugen Shinzo Ken, I cannot be defeated. Your hero Oldham was just child's play to me, and he was your leader! What can you do that he could not?"

Some of the gunmen hesitated, Jago's skill was legendary, and his movement was as lightning. He moved so quickly that some believed that he could see the future. His strikes were so fierce that it was said he

didn't need to touch someone to take them down.

He did a backflip in the air over the now three manned table, spinning in the air and taking them all down with an upside-down helicopter kick. Each went unconscious immediately. He landed on the table with a one-handed handstand, bullet fire still raining down on him. He just smiled. He pushed off with his hand as he soared through the air landing in between a group of men. He quickly counted, there were sixteen people who were left conscious in the room.

Most of the gunmen were dumbfounded. They knew that Jago was good, but this seemed impossible. Even with the continuing gunfire, he moved so fluidly, with no hesitation and with no fear. It was as if he wasn't human. He grabbed the nearest gunmen closest to him, throwing him into three others. He then did a roundhouse kick that sent the two other in the group he was standing in flying. *Ten left*, he thought.

Some of the gunmen staggered backwards, lowering their guns. He had taken out ten men in less than a minute. The two nearest Jago dropped their guns in fear. He showed them no mercy, striking one in the throat, while simultaneously tripping the other with a backwards sweep and slamming him down with his other elbow.

Jago felt nothing as he fought except for the hatred he had for that man. It burned his very soul, consumed his every thought. Until he killed Lynn Forsigth, he would receive no peace of mind. The rest of the gunmen huddled together to shoot Jago, confident that their numbers could stop him. Jago jumped up in the air, avoiding the bullet fire, and then jumped off the wall near him, straight towards the last group of men.

All the men stood dumbfounded as he soared over ten feet towards them, over their heads in a twisting side flip. As he landed he clapped

both hands together, and then pushed them outward. A crack like lightning split the tavern as the eight men were pushed back by an unseen force ten meters each, some implanting in the walls. Only the bartender, who watched everything in amazement, remained standing.

Jago smirked, scum like this reminded him of how much he hated Lynn. He heard the cock of a gun behind him. The bartender raised his pistol to Jago, whose back was completely turned against him. He had no chance in dodging the bullet, if the weapon was fired.

Pits of Andor! I was reckless! Jago thought. Suddenly, a shot was fired, and the bartender collapsed, dead. Jago looked to the source of the gunfire.

Tyrn Ridner held her pistol with both hands, the smoke still coming off the barrel. She wore the full Imperial military uniform, crimson and red. Her blond hair was cropped back in a bun, her sky-blue eyes looking at Jago in both admiration and irritation.

“I had him covered, Tyrn,” Jago contended, “I didn’t need your help.”

“Blast it, Jago! You can’t be reckless like this!” she chastised.

Jago yawned, “Yeah, because a couple of hooligans could totally kill me, whatever! These are just children compared to how skilled Lynn is!”

“You idiot! You can’t be doing these kind of things! You’re a high ranking officer in the military! Don’t you care what would happen to the people you care about if you were to die?! How I would feel?!”

Jago ignored her words. If he hadn’t been filled with only pure hatred for Lynn, he would have noticed Tyrn’s amazing beauty and love that she had for him. As it was, he scowled in disappointment about not

learning anything about Lynn again. The man was a ghost, a Demon sent to torture him. As long as he remained on earth, he had no time for love or for caution.

“Hey! You can’t speak to your commanding officer that way! How would the rest of the Company react if they knew that I could get bossed around by you?”

She walked over to him, her arms trembling and slapped him as hard as she could. Jago’s face stung, completely surprised.

“I’ll do what I must, you idiot! You can’t be so selfish! If you were to die, the entire military would collapse! You’re the empire’s hero!” She turned her back on him, sincerely frightened on how close Jago had been to being killed. She didn’t know what she would do if he died.

Jago’s callous shell broke as he realized how upset she was. He could almost feel something in his heart softening a little. Almost. He grabbed her shoulder, and she blushed. She turned around to look at him, his dark eyes softer than the ice-cold ones earlier.

“I’m sorry Tyrn,” he sincerely apologized, “I didn’t mean to upset you.” He grabbed her hand, “I’ll do better in the future,” as he looked her in her warm blue eyes, “You’re right. I have to think about more than myself.”

She blushed furiously and looked away, “Don’t read too much into it,” she stammered, “I’m your partner. And if you died, they’d assign Seth as my new partner, and he’s even stupider than you.”

Jago laughed and let go of her, “Tyrn, you’re so cold. You sure know how to make a man feel loved.” She blushed even more and started walking away.

“Let’s go,” she commanded, “they’re about to start Oldham’s

execution.”

Jago looked around at the mess of bodies, the only one who had died was the bartender. “What do we do with these guys?” he asked.

“Just leave them, Jago!” she answered, exasperated, “They’ve lost all hope of ever defeating the empire with this debacle.”

They walked outside the tavern and approached their vehicles.

“How did you find me anyways?” Jago asked Tyrn as he got onto his hovercycle.

Tyrn scowled at him, “Seth told me you were ‘hitting the town,’ so I figured that you were going to look for Lynn. This is the worst tavern in Atoli, so I figured you’d go here.”

Jago looked up at her, “I can’t believe you know me so well.”

“Well, Jago. You’re not that hard to figure out. Besides, I wouldn’t be a very good partner if I didn’t know where to find you.” Jago looked surprised, taken aback.

Jago reflected, *Would I ever be able to find Tyrn if I needed her and she’d disappeared? We’ve been partners for three years, but I honestly don’t know a whole lot about her. I may have to depend on her to save my life.*

“Listen, Tyrn,” he stammered, “I’m sorry about before. It’s been... hard for me to focus on anything but Lynn.”

Tyrn was surprised, this was the first time that she’d seen Jago like this. He was always disregarding his own life, always seeking Lynn. He didn’t have time to think about the others around him. He may smile at times, and laugh, but there was always that burning hatred at the forefront of his thoughts. She’d known him three years and he’d always

been the same. When did he start to change?

“I’ll make it up to you, though,” he started, “How about, after the execution, we grab a bite to eat, my treat?”

Tyrn blushed, “Okay, that’d be nice. Though I don’t know if I’ll have any appetite.”

“We can skip the execution, then” Jago said, “I’ll call General Tomath to let him know.”

“But you captured Oldham yourself, you’ve never missed an execution before!” she exclaimed.

“I think I’ve spent too much time focusing on Lynn,” he said quietly, “And besides, there is no victory in death. I don’t enjoy the executions. I go to ensure that there won’t be any uprising.”

“Then it’s especially important that we go,” she argued, “Oldham was their leader. There’s sure to be some commotion.”

Jago shook his head, “The rest of the Leviathan Company can handle it. They’re plenty prepared. Besides, the Rebellion has been crushed, there’s no one left to retaliate.”

Tyrn held her arm awkwardly, confused, “This is just so out of character for you, I don’t know what to say.”

“If I start to ignore those who are supposed to be closest to me, how will I be any different than Lynn? I’ve recognized that today. I can’t be a mass of hatred; I’ll never be able to stop him that way.

“Besides, you mean too much to me for me to ignore you,” He reasoned, “I hardly know you at all and we’ve been partners for three years. As you said, we’re partners, and I’ll have your back as much as

you have mine.”

Tyrn blushed and looked away, turning back to her car. She touched a button near the door handle, and the hovercar zoomed away, running back to her house. She turned to look at Jago.

“Okay, then, if we’re going to go, do you mind if you stop by my place real quick? I’d like to change.”

“Sure, no problem. Just let me just call General Tomath first.”

Jago got out his phone and called the general. The conversation was short. Jago looked at Tyrn and smiled.

“General Tomath told me we’re good to go, he’s got the execution covered. Hop on.” Tyrn jumped on his hovercycle, and wrapped her arms around Jago. She leaned her head on his shoulder. His back was warm.

They soared through the air, hardly any traffic was surrounding them. Typically, it was always busy in Atoli, but most people would be at the execution. Whether you were a rebel supporter, or a staunch imperialist, it marked the beginning of a new era.

They quickly arrived at Tyrn’s place. Tyrn jumped off, “Just give me a few minutes, I’ll be right back.”

Jago waited patiently, looking at the setting sun. He reflected how much hate he had earlier. *Am I really that lost?* he thought, *Am I so filled with hate that I can’t feel anymore? I used to be so happy, am I willing Lynn to win by hating him this much?* He shook his head, *No, even if I can’t obtain peace until he’s dead, I won’t let him rob me of everything that I once was, everything that I stand for.* He thought about Tyrn, she really was nice, not to mention beautiful, and he really did depend on her. Had he really been so callous for so long? *I want to feel*

again, he resolved, without having to see Lynn's body at my feet. No matter what I must do, I can't face him as I am now, a shell of a man.

Tyrn stepped outside of her house, her hair down, wearing a beautiful blue dress and carrying her purse. Jago stood dumbfounded. Tyrn was beautiful on a normal basis, but she was simply breathtaking. He didn't think he'd ever seen her outside of her military regalia.

"Wow Tyrn, you look breathtaking," he said, awed.

Tyrn blushed, "Thanks. Well then, should we get going?"

"Sure, let's go."

They flew high into the air, into the setting sun. Tyrn kept close hold of Jago as they sailed through the city, finally stopping on top of a rooftop restaurant, a local favorite, named after the city, *Atoli*.

"This is one of my favorites," Tyrn said, smiling.

"I'm not surprised," Jago responded, "They have really good food here. It's my favorite as well."

As they walked through the door, a waiter greeted them and rushed them to a table. "What can I start you off to drink, tonight?" he asked the two.

"I'll have gardish juice," Tyrn responded.

"I'll take the same," Jago replied.

Drinking is strictly prohibited for active military members, even if they were off duty. The only time it was allowed was when you were on leave. The Irati Empire believed that to have the best soldiers, they must have keen minds all the time. And they proved their worth by being the best military in the world.

“Let me know when you are ready to order, I’ll be back with your drinks shortly,” the waiter said.

“So. Tyrn, what do you like best from their menu?” Jago asked.

“Hmm...,” she contemplated, “I’d have to say the smoked Irati Tilapia with a side of mashed potatoes. How about yourself?”

“I’m not really a big fan of fish myself. My favorite is a rare Corvan steak with a side of fried rice.”

“Steak suits you,” she told him, “theirs is really good I have to agree.”

The waiter came back, filled their glasses and took their orders. As they waited for the food, Jago kept asking Tyrn questions about her life.

“Tyrn, do you have someone special in your life? Someone you hold dear?” he asked her tactlessly.

Tyrn blushed and looked down, “Not currently. I joined the military when my parents died in the Corvan invasion, and I haven’t had much time to date anyone.”

“Oh,” Jago said, “I’m sorry to have to have brought that up.”

“It’s fine,” she reassured him, “I don’t mind. I do have a cat though. His name is Mark.”

“Ah, so you’re a cat person then?”

She smiled, “I guess, what about yourself?”

Jago laughed, “I guess I would have to say I’m more of a dog person myself.”

“What do you like to do for fun after work?” he inquired.

“Normally, I’ll read a book and go for a walk.”

“What kind of books do you like to read?”

“All kinds, though I have been reading various philosophers’ works lately such as Tarrik and Yslevof.”

“Wow, that’s really deep reading. You’re quite the philosopher.”

“What about yourself?” she asked.

Jago looked up and thought for a moment, “I’m not sure. I don’t really remember the last time I had fun before this. However, I do hit the gym a lot or work with Riza with fixing up Axial, my Leviathan.”

“But what about when you’re not focusing about Lynn or the military, what do you do?”

“I don’t know if I know that answer. I’ve.. been preoccupied with Lynn for so long that it’s become part of my daily routine. Work out, improve Axial, read strategy books, such as those by Sanarek or Blothought... Before, this, before the military, I used to go fishing and camping with my father, or play in the woods near my house back home with my little brother.”

“Oh, this is the first time I’ve heard about your family. Do you not see them very often?”

Jago’s face tore up with pain, his hands starting to tremble, “They’re dead...”

Tyrn eyes widened with shock as she realized her mistake, “Oh, I’m so sorry for bringing that up.”

“No... It’s okay... I haven’t really talked about it with anyone ever...”

Their food arrived, and as they were eating, Jago debated whether to tell her what happened to his family. It was crucial to have her understand if they were truly to be partners.

“Is your tilapia good?” he asked her.

She smiled, “It is, thank you. How about your steak?”

“It’s as good as I remember.”

“Hey, Tyrn. Where would I be able to find you if you’re not at home or with me at work?”

“Hmm... There’s a park near my house that has an amazing open field. Typically, you’ll be able to find me laying in the fields over there reading a book, if I’m not at my place.”

“Thanks, that’s good to know. It’s important that we have each other’s back. If you ever find yourself in trouble, don’t hesitate to ask me for help. I’ll help with whatever you get yourself in.”

Tyrn blushed and coughed up some tilapia, “Thanks Jago. You’re acting so differently today.”

“Yeah, sorry if I haven’t been fully there before now. I think I’m just about to pull through the shell I was beforehand.”

He looked deeply into her eyes, she truly was beautiful, someone who was worth protecting and being there for.

“Listen, I know that you didn’t know about my family, it’s okay. But I think I’m finally ready to talk about what happened five years ago.”

“Oh Jago, I don’t want to bring up any bad memories.”

“It’s fine. I really need to talk to someone about this... Do you

know why I hate Lynn Forsigth so much?”

“All anyone’s told me is that you’ve lost to him in battle a few times... And that he killed your previous partner.”

Jago nodded, “That’s true. But I hated him as I do now even before then. You see, Lynn was my best friend growing up, we might have been brothers. When I went to train with my master, Roken Jiryuku, at age thirteen to learn the Mugen Shinzo Ken, I left knowing that it’d be a few years before I saw my family again. The Irati Empire was still just one country then, not the giant Empire it is today. I left Lynn to take care of my family, he’s a few years older than I was. He was the kindest man I knew; we were the best of friends.”

“When I got back from training at age seventeen, I knew something was wrong right away. The door was opened and crooked. I went into the house to see the mangled corpses of my father, my mother, and my brother all on the ground in a pool of blood.” Tears started streaming down his face as his hands trembled. “I checked to see if they were alive all the while screaming for help. The look on their faces...” He paused, a stream of tears coming down.

Tyrn grabbed his hand, “It’s okay Jago, you don’t have to continue if you don’t want to.”

He shook his head, “No, I must. Their faces were horrified. Their bodies were still warm. I knew that they’d just been killed. I looked around the house searching for the murderers, my body covered in my family’s blood. I knew something was wrong. Lynn wasn’t there. As I went to the back terrace, he stood there, a bloody knife in his hand. He was looking up to the sky as it rained down. When he noticed that he was there, he turned to me and smiled... I demanded to know why, why had he killed them all. He just smiled... smiled at me, and jumped off

the edge of the terrace.

“At first, I thought he committed suicide, yet he rose into the air in a Leviathan, the exo-suit a soulless black. It was the first of its kind, and it rocketed off into the night. Many people believe that the Irati were first to use the Leviathan’s, yet Lynn had one first. And he is the leader of the Corvan military now. He made the first strike on Irati, not us. Since the Rebellion started, because people disagreed with the war, I knew I had to put it down. Lynn, in the name of Corva, killed my family. This war is justified, which is why I’m going to see it through. That is why I joined the military, and I won’t stop until Lynn is dead. He took everything away from me...”

Jago was freely crying now. He couldn’t stop it. He kept remembering those faces, *Mother, Father, Ian, I will avenge you*. Tyrn got up and wrapped her arms around Jago.

“It’s okay Jago. You can let it out.”

Jago sniffed as he tried to control his tears, “Thanks. I’m sorry, it’s just you’re the first person in the Company to know of this. This is why I’m broken, why I hate him so much.”

Tyrn grabbed his face and made him look at her, “No! Don’t ever say you’re broken. You have people around you who still care about you, let us help you.”

Jago kept crying in her arms for a few minutes. She held him tightly. His shell had finally broken. He could feel more than just hatred again. The pain and sorrow of his family’s death had broken it. He remembered the love he had for them, the kindness and passion of them. Feelings of gratitude for Tyrn washed over him. He could get through this with her, he didn’t have to feel sole hatred with her. She

understood him.

Jago wiped the tears from his eyes, “Thank you Tyrn. This really means alot to me. I can finally see past the hatred.”

He grasped her hands and sat back in his seat, “You’re a really amazing person, do you know that?”

Tyrn blushed at the compliment, relieved that he had regained control of himself. It was disconcerting to see Jago like this, especially because he was always so strong. Nothing ever seemed to get to him. She thought about how little she actually knew about him and the struggles that he had been through.

“I’m sorry if I ruined your meal,” he said embarrassed.

Tyrn looked at her plate, she had lost her appetite, yet her plate was still about half full.

“It’s fine. I’m glad that you opened up to me.”

They waited awkwardly for a moment before Jago asked for his bill.

“It’s on the house Master Kale,” the waiter said, “We can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done for this country.”

Jago was taken aback, surprised at the kindness, “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“It seems everyone around here sees you as the hero you are,” Tyrn smiled.

Jago just smiled in return. As they got back on his hovercycle, Jago asked, “Thanks for coming with me tonight, Tyrn.”

“No worries Jago, I enjoyed myself,” Tyrn replied.

Jago was skeptical, “Really?”

Tyrn grinned, “Well it wasn’t grand by any measure, but I’m glad you asked me to be here with you.”

Jago remained silent as they flew back to Tyrn’s place. Jago walked Tyrn to her door, his heart conflicted.

“Well,” Jago said, “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Tyrn smiled, “I guess.”

Jago turned to leave, but hesitated. Tyrn was about to walk into her house when Jago stopped her, “You wouldn’t happen to want to go out sometime this week, would you?”

Tyrn started blushing again, taken off guard. “Sure,” she replied, “that would be nice.”

Jago grinned, “I’ll let you know what we’re going to do later, but it’ll be a lot more cheery than tonight. A proper date.”

He jumped back on his hovercycle the moment he mentioned the word date and took off, too embarrassed to see her reaction. Tyrn stood in her doorway smiling. She liked this new Jago.

Later that night, as Jago was lying in his bed awake, he contemplated what the day had been like. *I’m almost there*, he thought, *just a little more push in the right direction, and I’ll be ready to live a normal life again*. He thought about Tyrn, excited about their upcoming date. His mind, however, always turned back to Lynn. He couldn’t help but feel intense hatred whenever he thought about him. It almost consumed his mind. *He will pay*, were Jago’s last thoughts as he drifted off to sleep.

Jago stood before a familiar scene. He had just finished his training

with Master Roken Jiryuku and after getting a ride from a stranger, was finally home. Even though it was dark and stormy, he didn't mind the warm rain covering his skin. Carrying a small pack on his shoulder, he looked up to the sky and smiled.

I'm home, he thought, Finally after all these years.

He stared at the house, warm memories resurfacing of his brother and him playing in the front lawn. *I've bet Ian's really grown*, he thought. He wanted to surprise his family, which is why he didn't call them beforehand. *Mom's going to be so excited to see me.*

As he approached the front door, something felt off. It was as if the air grew heavier. The door was slightly ajar and crooked. It looked as if the top hinge had broken off. Not only that, but the door was splintered, as if it were ready to shatter.

Jago's heart started racing as his blood ran cold.

Something's not right, he thought as he slowly opened the door.

When he entered, the house was dark, no lights were on. Unusual, even though it was evening. There was a rancid smell in the air as well. As Jago slowly past the entrance into the living room, he saw them.

His family's bodies were strewn across the living room floor, covered in blood. Jago ran to them, his eyes disbelieving what he was seeing.

"MOM, DAD, IAN!" he shouted as he knelt beside them. He turned his brother's body in his hands. It was still warm. Ian's lifeless eyes looked up at him, his face frozen in horror.

This can't be real, Jago thought over and over again. *I must be dreaming.*

He shook his brother, “Ian, Ian, IAN!!”

Ian’s lifeless body made no response. Jago gently dropped his brother. He held up his hands, covered in blood. A horrendous noise encompassed the house. Jago realized it was his own voice. He stared at his family, his eyes blinded with tears. They had each been stabbed near the heart.

“RAHHHH!!!!!!” he screamed in pain and misery.

He continued to scream holding his bloody hands up, his body in shock. Lightning flashed across the windows, a giant shadow cast over his body. Jago looked to where the shadow originated. On the back terrace, a lone figure stood in the rain.

“Someone help me!!!” Jago screamed, “Please!! Anyone!!! My family!!! HELP!!!!!!”

He stumbled trying to get up, “Please,” he pleaded, “anyone...”

He walked towards the back terrace, trying to get the attention of whoever stood there, not wondering who it was. The sliding glass door to the back terrace was already open. He stumbled into the stormy night.

“Please you have to help!” he shouted at the personage, who was draped with a cloak. The person slowly turned their head, their flame red hair, illuminated by the storm.

Jago’s eyes opened wide with shock, “LYNN!! You have to help them!” he begged, “Ian, Mother, Father, they’re... they’re... PLEASE!!!!”

His eyes looked at Lynn’s unresponsive body. He noticed in Lynn’s right hand, he held a bloody carving knife. Jago’s heart nearly leaped

out of his chest as he realized what had happen.

“No, It can’t be...,” he said in barely more than a whisper, “No, you couldn’t have...”

Lynn’s kind eyes looked into Jago’s, and he smiled, his face covered with blood.

Jago took a step back, a chill running through his body, “You were my best friend. Why, Lynn? TELL ME WHY!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Lynn looked over the terrace down below and jumped. Jago lurched forward in surprise trying to stop him. *NO!!!!* he thought as Lynn slipped through his fingers. *He couldn’t deal with the guilt of killing them, so he decided to kill himself*, Jago thought as Lynn sunk down below.

Suddenly a roar like thunder shook near Lynn, an explosion rocketed Lynn upwards. As he hovered over the terrace, Lynn looked at Jago. Jago was stunned, he had never seen anything like it before. Lynn was covered in some sort of exosuit, as black as darkness itself. Emerald flames held him up in the air. The suit was sleek and pointed. It looked like a demon from childhood. It had spikes protruding from its elbows, knees, and shoulders. The rain caught the suit, and every drop zapped and evaporated as if it were shocked. His face still covered in blood Lynn kept smiling at Jago.

“NO!” Jago shouted, “NOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Lynn then rocketed into the stormy night, leaving Jago screaming in the rain.

Chapter 2

*I looked in at awe at the
thunderous power emitting
from the Captain. It was as
if the sky itself had broken.*

- Shado Senshi: Iratian Ensign

Jago woke up in a cold sweat, like he always did. He looked at his clock, which displayed 3:30 A.M. It was time for him to get up. He didn't get much sleep anymore; he didn't need it. He started his vigorous morning routine by running ten kilometers. He then did 1,000 pushups, situps and squats, followed by 100 pullups. By the time he was finished, it was only 4:30. He did this everyday since that fateful night.

After he had showered and gotten dressed for the day, he browsed through the paperwork he had brought home from the military. Among the papers were maps of the various enemy strongholds, updates of where the combat units were, and various documents listing equipment and provisions in the field. The battles were going poorly. The Corvan Military had proven itself a worthy adversary against the mighty Irati Empire. After reading several reports on the enemy battlements, Jago concluded that it wasn't numbers that was the problem. The Iratian Army outnumbered the Corvan two to one. The problem was that the Corvan soldiers were more skilled. Jago surmised that this was the result of the war draft. Iratian soldiers were forced into the battlefield, not volunteers. The Corvan Army seemed to have gathered all of its soldiers from people who actually wanted to fight. Jago took down notes on what they could do to improve the situation. *There's nothing worse in battle than a spineless soldier*, Jago thought as he organized

his notes.

Even after sorting through all the paperwork, the clock read 7:00 A.M.. Soldiers didn't have to report to the compound until 8:00, and the ride to the compound was very short. Jago sighed, there wasn't much he could do but wait. He picked up a book Sanarek's, *Song of War*, and read through it again for the upteenth time. Most of his war strategy he gained from this book, it had proven its worth, so much so, that Jago had advanced to Captain in under a year. Deciding that it was time to start heading over to the base, Jago organized all of his information, jumped on his hovercycle, and flew off to work,

As Jago arrived at the base, he went to the training hall. Hand-to-hand combat was always the first part of the day. He was the second to arrive, the other being Ben. He was there practicing his various Flying Eagle forms of fighting. There were still ten minutes left until eight, and most arrived five till.

As the time passed, the Company trickled in. They were a small unit, comprised of only twelve people. At the lowest rank, there was Third Sergeant Ceri Dreif and Third Sergeant Roso Mift. Ceri was a short woman, standing only at 1.55 meters. She was known for her strawberry-blond hair and her short temper. She had a short fuse and a fiery spirit.

Roso was almost the complete opposite, calm and collected. He stood over two meters tall and had dark brown skin. He was known for his amazing intelligence and his grace under pressure.

Next in the ranks were Second Sergeant Orlo Goff and Staff Sergeant Mishti Varnu. Orlo was a short and stubby man, known for his exact obedience at following orders. He had narrow eyes and sallow skin. Many thought that he was dim witted, but he could surprise people

at times with his astute observations.

Mishti was a highly intelligent woman, and had an aptitude with weapons technology. She had dark hair and tan skin and stood at 1.61 meters. She was known for having many custom modifications on her Leviathan, which some were reverse engineered from enemy Corvan units.

Master Sergeant Ilek Kran was the next rank up. People said that he and Jago looked similar enough that they could be related. He stood at 1.81 meters and unlike Jago, he was quite an optimist. He was always whistling a tune wherever he went. People couldn't help but smile whenever he talked to them.

Following Kran was First Sergeant Bors Grund. He had a flamboyant personality. His hair was like fire, and it would dance in the wind. He was tall and skinny, standing over 2.01 meters tall. He had a flair for the ostentatious and ridiculous and was always making ridiculous movements whenever he fought. He frequently annoyed the other members of the company with his antics.

Next was Ensign Jaled Stalls. He was a battle hardened soldier with years of experience, who had seen much bloodshed. He was a quiet and reserved person, his only friends the flowers he tended. He was the most ruthless person on the team, who did not believe in mercy, and had a strong sense of justice. He was of average height, standing at 1.7 meters. He had dark hair and dark eyes, and constantly wore a blood soaked bandana, in memory of his fallen compatriots.

Following him was Ensign Shado Senshi, a legendary warrior from her home region. She had ebony black hair, and luminescent skin. She stood at 1.67 meters and was renowned for her ice-cold personality. She

was like death itself.

Warrant Officer Ben Draks was fourth in command. He was a peaceful and gentle soul. He had bronze skin and dark hair. He had heart piercing eyes and a strong deep voice. He stood at 1.98 meters. He followed the ancient ways of his small village, and practiced the fighting style of the Flying Eagle. It was said that he was undefeatable and many believed that he was the spirit of an eagle in the form of a man.

Second Lieutenant Seth Organ was a tad unhinged. He was arrogant and brash as well. He was at the forefront of the battles, hardly caring about his own safety or the safety of his companions. He had thick broad shoulders, and stood at 1.86 meters. He was known never to back down from one of his decisions, and he was a bit of a slacker. He shirked his duties whenever he could to go have fun. All of the Company respected him as a warrior, but they could hardly stand near him. He had blonde hair and blue eyes and always wore a smug grin on his face, like he was better than everyone else. He picked fights with the other squadrons and had been suspended from duty more than once.

If it wasn't for First Lieutenant Tyrn Ridner, the Company would have fallen apart. She was the most responsible out of all them. She stood at 1.64 meters and was the best shot in the world. She was so talented with a rifle, that she could scope the fly out of a swamp more than two miles away in a storm. She was a kind soul most of the time, but when angered, she was the most dangerous woman alive. She had earned the nickname "Deadeye" for her amazing marksmanship.

It was up to Captain Jago Yen Kale to lead all of these soldiers. It wasn't an easy job for him, and he was known for being particularly lax with his team compared to the rest of the soldiers. Most of the time, he

prepared his company to fight elite soldiers from the enemy army. At 1.78 meters tall, Jago felt small compared to the role given him. He only agreed to be Captain in the first place to find Lynn.

Jago examined the Company, everyone seemed to be in tip-top shape, if not a bit drowsy. Hand-to-hand combat was always a good way to wake everyone up, especially if the odds were against their favor. Of the women, Shado was the most skilled fighter, but even she would be hard put with dealing with three people at once.

Jago smirked as he announced the first match, “Okay Company, the first match of today will be Ensign Senshi against Lieutenant Ridner, Sergeant Varnu, and Sergeant Dreif.”

Shado looked at Jago with a death glare, she knew that this was ridiculous. Although the others weren’t as skilled at her, they did have enough combat experience that even she would be hard pressed taking on two of them together, let alone three.

“What, you can’t handle it?” Jago taunted her, “I thought you were an elite warrior.”

“I’ll do what I must,” Shado rebutted tersely.

As the four took to their fighting stances, cold sweat ran down Shado’s face. The others were fairly happy, it wasn’t often that they were given this much of an advantage against her, and they never would have been able to beat her with any less than they had. Tyrn especially lacked hand-to-hand experience, she preferring the rifle over all. And due to Ceri’s small stature, she lacked the physical prowess to do much harm, despite her explosive spirit. Mishti was the most skilled out of the three, primarily skilled in kickboxing, but she started to sweat as she looked into Shado’s eyes. She saw the mark of the warrior, the killing

intent.

Jago raised his arm in the air, “Begin!”

Ceri charged at Shado, her impatience getting the better of her. Shado ducked under her hook and threw her over her shoulder. Ceri hit the ground with a loud crack. The other two slowly approached Shado, waiting for some sort of an attack. Feeling embarrassed about being tossed around like a sack of potatoes, Ceri swept her legs at Shado, who jumped with ease over her kick and flipped over both Tyrn and Mishti. The two, who were ready for Shado’s move, grabbed one leg each out of the air and slammed Shado into the ground. A whoosh of air escaped Shado’s breath; she thought she had them.

Now that she was on the ground, Ceri tackled Shado, angry. She tried to grab at her to choke her, but Shado wasn’t taking any of it. She wrapped both legs around Ceri’s neck in a triangle, and started to choke her out. Not wanting to let Ceri choke out, Mishti pulled at Shado’s back and legs, trying to force her to release. Tyrn stood awkwardly while this was happening, unsure of where to grab. Shado grabbed Mishti’s neck with her hands and pulled as hard as she could. Mishti sailed over Shado’s shoulders straight into Ceri. Tyrn, who saw an opening, kicked at Shado’s head, who just skillfully dodged, and grabbed her leg, pulling her down with everyone else.

Everyone was sprawled out on the ground. Shado was embarrassed that she had been taken to the ground and kicked away at the other three while she got up. The three followed suit, groaning. Shado’s throw had taken a lot out of them. Ceri was almost as red as her hair. Tyrn’s hair was everywhere and out of place, and Mishti breathed heavily, out of breath. They knew that the fight would be difficult, but it was as if Shado was a class of her own.

Shado knew that if she had had her swords, the fight would have been over before it even began. The reach from her blades typically made a good defense for her. Now she had been taken down, and she was starting to tire. She had to end the fight quickly if she was going to win.

Shado charged at them, moving in a blur. The other's readied for her attack, not realizing how fast she was moving. Shado struck at Mishti's face with an open fist, her palm meeting Mishti's cheek bone. Mishti's face snapped back, and she was out. She dropped to the ground, unconscious. Tyrn, whose eyes widened with terror raised her fists to her face, not wanting the same thing happen to her. Shado smirked as she kicked Tyrn deep in her stomach, pushing her to the ground. Tyrn squealed in pain as she struggled to breathe. Shado jumped on top of her and started to choke her out. Tyrn was out in less than fifteen seconds. Only Ceri remained.

Ceri, as Shado finished choking Tyrn out, jumped onto Shado's unprotected back and placed her arm around Shado's neck in a perfect rear naked choke. Shado was surprised, she had left herself unguarded. She struggled to try to pry Ceri off, but Ceri wouldn't let go. Shado's vision dimmed as she slipped into unconsciousness.

Jago raised his arm again, "Stop," he smirked at Ceri, "It seems that you've won."

Ceri was excited and pumped her arms in the air, "Yeah! Take that Shado, I can beat you!"

Shado had already regained consciousness and her face showed murder. Jago waved at Ceri, "Now, now Ceri. It's unwise to taunt Shado. She's much stronger than you."

Ceri ran off to the sidelines excited. The other girls groaned as they got up, even Shado. They were humiliated. They had lost, and the person who won was the shortest and most spontaneous out of all of them.

Jago laughed, “That’s okay girls, give it more practice, and I’m sure you’ll do better next time.”

They all looked at Jago with a death glare, which he nervously chuckled to, “Okay, go back in line. It’s time for the next fight. The next match will be between Lieutenant Organ and Ensign Stalls.” He motioned them forward, “To your positions.”

The Company was excited about this fight, both were amazingly gifted soldiers, and both were a little crazy. Seth brash and unyielding, Jaled cold and calculating, they were both as skilled as the other. Jaled had more experience, yet Seth outclassed him in raw strength.

Jaled smiled at Seth in a cold sneer, “Let’s see if you can keep up, boy.”

“Don’t die now on me, old man,” Seth retorted.

“Begin!” Jago shouted.

They moved as fast as a whip towards each other, Seth bombarded Jaled with a flurries of punches and kicks, all of which were blocked or dodged by Jaled. Jaled moved fluidly, like running water, bobbing up and down between the kicks and punches.

“Stay still for a moment!” Seth shouted frustrated.

Jaled struck upwards at Seth’s jaw, but was dodged just in time. Seth countered with a backwards kick flip, which sent Jaled flying. Jaled recovered with a backflip and a charge. He struck out at Seth like

a viper, his powerful strikes enveloping Seth. Seth kept his guard up, his sleeves torn to shred, blood running down his forearms.

Seth grinned, “Is that all you got?” He punched Jaled straight in the face, sending him reeling backwards. Jaled spit blood out of his mouth. Seth rushed forward, swinging and jabbing, trying to break Jaled’s guard. Jaled still dodged and blocked almost effortlessly.

His attacks are slowing, Jaled thought, he’s tiring himself out. He’s not conserving energy. Seth struck out again and again, his breathing growing ragged. *Why can’t I hit him?* he thought as he huffed.

Jaled saw an opening between attacks and sent Seth flying with a roaring uppercut. Seth collapsed onto the ground, unconscious. Jaled spit more blood out of his mouth. *What a fool,* he thought, *he could have beaten me had he conserved some of his strength.*

“Stop,” Jago commanded, “the winner is Jaled.”

Jago helped Seth up, whose lip and face swollen. He walked sullenly back to the line. Time was running short for combat training. They only had time for one last match. Jago smiled mischievously.

“Okay,” he said, “the last match of this morning will be all of you against me. Let’s see if you can take me on.”

The Company was shocked, Jago had taken five people at once, but never the entire Company. They were humiliated, he thought he was so much better than the rest of them. They grumbled to each other in anger.

“Okay Captain, if that’s what you want,” Ilel said, “you’ll hear no complaints from me.”

Everyone surrounded Jago and readied their fighting positions. *This*

might get interesting, Jago thought as he shouted, “Begin!”

Ilek, Jaled, and Ceri rushed Jago at once, coming at him from all sides. Jago remained motionless as they approached him, Ceri lashing out with a roundhouse kick, Jaled with a flying kick, and Ilel trying to grab Jago from behind. They didn’t stand a chance, Jago effortlessly blocked all of their moves at once, throwing Ilel into Ceri, and then grabbed Jaled in the air and kned him hard in the diaphragm.

The rest of the Company looked on in horror, the three were out cold, with just a single blow. Bors, Roso, and Shado approached Jago slowly, looking for a weakness in Jago’s defense. Jago remained still. He was determined not to move unless forced.

Bors struck out at Jago, moving his arms like he was dancing. His flair for looking cool would be his undoing. Jago dodged his strikes, his feet unmoving. Bors swept at Jago’s legs, Jago jumped up and kicked Bors in the head. He was down.

Roso moved in, relying on his longer reach to beat Jago. He struck out in a flurry, targeting vital spots. Jago vanished, dodging Roso’s attacks. Roso looked around for him, wondering where he was. Jago came down from above and kicked Roso in the neck, sending him to the ground.

Shado moved in, trying to take Jago off guard. She was an exceptional warrior, and had it been anyone else in the Company besides Jago, she would have destroyed them. However, Jago was not the rest of the Company, and dodged and blocked her attacks. She struck out, her hands like swords, trying to cut Jago. Jago grabbed her hands out of midair and slammed her to the ground. She was still exhausted from her previous battle and passed out on the ground.

Ben, Orlo, and Mishti approached Jago next. Of the Company, Ben worried him the most. He was easily the most skilled warrior of the rest of the Company. He had never lost a battle. Jago purposely avoided fighting him in combat training, because he knew how skilled he was. Now he was attacking him with two other people. Jago wasn't too worried about Orlo or Mishti, he could take them both down in one move. Ben, however, moved like lightning, never striking at his opponent.

As Orlo and Mishti approached him, Jago clapped his hands together. A noise like thunder split the room and Mishti and Orlo were sent reeling backwards, unconscious. Jago had no time to play with them. He waited for Ben's attack.

Ben made no motion to attack, he was as always, calm. Jago struck out at him, Ben easily dodged and then tried to grab Jago's arm to throw him. Jago, however, was too fast for him. He pulled his arm back just in time while simultaneously kicking at Ben, trying to hit his chest. Ben dodged skillfully and rolled under Jago's leg behind Jago. He had him.

Jago did the only thing he could do and dropped to the ground, avoiding Ben's arms. He pushed off of the ground hard, right into Ben's chest. Ben flew upwards. Jago wasn't finished, before Ben landed, he threw his fist forward. The room illuminated with light as an explosion erupted from Jago's fist. Ben was knocked backwards, his body smoking. He collapsed, unconscious.

Tyrn and Seth approached Jago. Seth was in no condition to fight and Tyrn was terrified. Jago looked at Seth with a fiery gaze, and Seth dropped to the ground. Tyrn charged at Jago, knowing that she stood no chance against him. Jago brought his arm back, waiting for Tyrn to attack. Right before she hit him, he brought his hand forward in a

punch, stopping an inch before hitting her face. The ground behind Tyrn heaved upwards, like an earthquake. Tyrn dropped to the ground, terror freezing her in place.

Jago smiled, “I win.”

The Company lay on the ground, defeated. They knew Jago was strong, but this was unfair. It was as if he were an entirely different class of being. Tyrn looked around at their ragged bunch and then looked at Jago. His breath was still, he wasn’t tired at all. What’s more is that he was completely unharmed, he hadn’t gotten hit even once. *He could probably take down this entire army*, Tyrn thought as she got up.

“Help everyone to their feet Lieutenant,” Jago ordered as he himself went to help everyone up. No one was seriously injured, just a few bruises and broken pride, but all were more than just a little resentful at Jago. They had never been humiliated in such a manner before. Even Ben, who was always cool and collected, seemed irritated.

Jago, feeling everyone’s mood chuckled nervously, “Well, there’s always next time guys.”

They all scowled at him as they left the room. He would have to remember to hold back the next time that he fought them. They all plowed into a briefing room where they were given status updates with the war. Their Company was on the reserves currently, having spent the entire previous month on the front lines. The Irati were losing ground against the Corvan military.

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Seth said as they reviewed the battle data, “We have both superior numbers and weapons technology, yet we’re losing to them.”

“That’s because of what we’re fighting for, I suppose,” Jago replied

thoughtfully, “It’s not about weapons or numbers to them. They’re fighting to protect their homes, their lives, their families. We’re fighting to conquer, so of course they are going to fight harder than us.”

“What we really need,” Ben stated, “is a new way of inspiring our soldiers to fight. They look to us as heroes, yet that doesn’t seem to be enough.”

“That’s really something General Tomath has to worry about,” Jago replied, “not us. I’m more worried about how we can do better as a Company, than the ones we have no control over.”

“Most of the time, we’re treated as a special forces unit,” Jaled scoffed, “they might as well put us in one. All we ever seem to do is clean up after the other platoons.”

“It’s Jago fault for that,” Ilel said, “since he’s the poster boy for the Empire, they don’t want to put their hero at risk.”

Jago clenched his fists in irritation, he knew they were right. The Empire avoided sending them out on the more dangerous raids against the Corvan, even when they were on the front lines, they were always accompanied with other platoons and left in the back. It seemed all Jago was good for was posing and making inspiring speeches. At this rate, it could well be another five years before Jago had an opportunity to fight Lynn again.

“I’ll talk to General Tomath again,” Jago said determined, “and see if we can take on more serious duties. As it is now, we are being wasted.”

After they reviewed the varying tactics on how they could improve the Company, they proceeded to the Leviathan docking bay, where the soldiers proceeded to inspect their Leviathans and perform various tests

on them. Jago went over to his station to inspect his Leviathan, the Axial.

The Axial stood a little over six feet tall. It looked similar to a set of armor, that was painted crimson and white all over it. The white helmet had a slanted red visor, and guns on the sides near the cheeks. The chestpiece was crimson at the top, where the chest was, and white to the waist. In the center of the chestpiece, there was a ruby orb, that served as the power source to the Leviathan. The shoulders were pointed in a rhombus, with free moving joints for full mobility. The arms and wrist were white as well, with rockets attached to each of the forearms. The hands were crimson, and despite being completely made out of steel, could move with just as much mobility and sensitivity as a human hand. A power pack encompassed the waist, as well as several magazines for a rifle. The legs were white and had boosters on the back, for flight. The feet were crimson, and had rockets beneath them as well.

Attached to the back was an exhaust vent and another power supply pack, circular in nature. Eight flaps were attached near the bottom of the pack, which could move about freely. The pack was also used for rocket powered flight as well.

A short young woman was underneath the Axial, welding part of the lower left leg.

“Riza, how’s the axial coming along?” Jago asked her as he approached.

The young woman, Riza Bloodthawne, stopped welding, and took off her glasses. She had mud brown hair and eyes, and was covered with grease. Her face was covered with freckles, and she looked barely older than a teenager. She wore a grease stained jumpsuit, the arms of

which were rolled back.

“Not too bad,” she replied, “I found a slight leak on the lower left leg, which is what I was just patching up, but otherwise, she’s in great condition.”

Jago smiled, “That’s good to hear, any new installments since yesterday?”

Riza shrugged, “No, but there is a new system that will go into prototyping soon.”

“What will it be,” Jago asked intrigued, “a new weapon or electro mag shield?”

“It’s supposed to augment your reaction time to act more quickly. The drones that Corva has sent out has been excellent at making first strikes. This should hopefully level the playing field. However, it is highly dangerous as it affects the nervous system in the brain. Which is why we haven’t moved to prototyping yet.”

“Any estimation on when it’ll be finished?” Jago asked.

Riza thought for a moment, “It’ll probably be a few weeks before the first prototype is built. The general does want the Axial to be that first prototype though.”

Jago grinned, he was always the first to prototype, “Excellent. Well, I’ll keep my eye out for it then. Has it a name?”

“The developers have been calling it the Apha Gear, but that probably won’t stay its name when it’s seen battle.”

Jago put his arm on the Axial’s shoulder, “We’ve been through alot together, him and me.” He looked at Riza, “Make sure you take care of

him.”

Riza snorted, “That’s my line you dork. You’re the one ravaging this guy every time you go out to a battlefield. Pretty much every part of him has been replaced at one time or another.”

Jago smiled, “Your father made one in a million when he made the Axial, Shortstuff. You’re a lot like him.” His smile faded, “He was a good friend and an excellent soldier. I could have never wished for a better partner.”

Riza was uncomfortable, she didn’t like to hear about her father, even though Jago talked about them all of the time. Even though it had been three years, the death of her father still pained her greatly. He had died when she was just sixteen.

Jago thought about when he had last seen her father, Jarom. Lynn had killed him as well. It was a terrible battle. Jarom had protected them all as they fled and had died as a true hero. And as a memento to him, Jago took up his Leviathan, to honor him. Every time he put it on, not only did he feel its power, but Jarom’s as well.

Jago stood still for a moment, paying his respects to his old friend. “Well Shortstuff,” he said, “I’ve got some business to attend to. Take care now, I’ll be back later.”

Riza took that as a cue to go back under the Axial to finish the repairs. She waved Jago goodbye and started to work on the leg again.

“Stupid Jago talking about my stupid father,” she muttered, “I’m ten times the engineer he was. Gonna get himself killed one of these days, and he’ll only have himself to blame.”

Jago ducked out of the Leviathan bay. It was time for him to talk to his commanding officer about getting into the warzone again. He was

tired of waiting around looking for Lynn.

I know Major Prida would never let me onto the battlefield if she could avoid it, but if Colonel Hughes won't let me fight, I'll just have to take this to General Tomath, Jago thought as he walked down the officer halls to Colonel Hughes's office. Major Laura Prida and Lieutenant Colonel Don Gioke were in the office talking and laughing when Jago entered it.

Laura Prida was a proud woman. She had grit and hated insubordination. Her red hair matched her personality. She had an aggressive personality and the men were terrified of her. She had little patience for stupidity and was known for her stubbornness.

Don Gioke on the other hand, was a relaxed man. He didn't let the small things bother him. He was ambitious and wanted to become a general one day. He had blonde hair and hazel eyes, and he was a very keen individual. He picked up on the little things, which he used to his advantage to help further his interests. He wasn't shrewd, but he was perceptive and more than a little crafty. He pretended to not care about anything, but he really did care for his men.

"Sir," Jago saluted to Laura and Don, "I'd like to speak to Colonel Hughes."

"Colonel Hughes is out of the office right now Captain," Laura explained to Jago, "But if you need anything, let me know. I'm your direct commanding officer."

Jago was irritated, like he needed any reminder. "Let me get straight to the point. My men and I are tired of parading around like we're part of a circus. We want to see some action. I've come here to ask to be moved to the battlefield."

Laura was frustrated with Jago, he was so stupid sometimes, “Listen Captain, we’ve gone over this before. I can’t let you get yourself killed in the battlefield.”

“That’s a load of crap Laura and you know it,” Jago retorted, “You know I can take care of myself.”

“Well, you’ve not impressed me as of yet, Captain!” she countered, “Sure, you may have amazing combat abilities, but your ability to lead is somewhat lacking. You march around with your eleven chosen warriors like you’re some kind of heroes, but you have more men than them to look after. Tell me Captain, how many men are in your company?”

“100 even,” Jago responded at once, “and I know every single one of their names, faces, strengths, and weaknesses. Don’t presume that I don’t my men, because I do.”

“Then why do you call your eleven the Company?”

“Because, out of the 100 men inside my company, only those eleven have the drive to be excellent soldiers.”

“What, so the rest are disposable pawns?”

“No, when I go to battle, I expect those men to do nothing but back the twelve of us up. If you notice, I’ve only lost four men when on the battlefield, and each one of them was a member of the Company that I had chosen. And in those battles, those men only lost their lives to one man, do you know who that man is Major?”

She stood there silently, her retort gone.

“You know as well as I do that I’m the only chance of stopping Lynn in this army. I’ve fought him more than anyone else, and I’ve

sustained the least casualties.”

Don butt in, “But you don’t understand Jago. You have fought him more than anyone else, yet every single one of those times, he beat you. He didn’t just beat you, he humiliated you. My problem with putting you on the battlefield, and Colonel Hughes shares the same opinion that I do, is that if you do find Lynn, you will lose. We’ve lost enough ground as it is. Lynn Forsigth has not been seen on the battlefield for over a year now, and he only seems to show up when you do. You want to know why we’ve kept you on the ground to snuff out the rebellion? It’s because while Lynn is away, we can keep winning the war. He seems to think you are the only one worthy of fighting him, and maybe that’s true, but it’s his pride that is costing him his victory, not you.”

Jago struggled to come up with something to counter his reasoning, “If Lynn was gone, then this war would be over, and I’m the only one who can defeat him!”

“Can you?” Don challenged, “As you said yourself, every time you have fought him, you’ve lost. And every time, every time mind you, he kills someone close to you. First it was John, then it was Sarah, then Jarom, and finally Tigo. Can’t you see, Jago?! He is toying with you, trying to make you so blinded with hate at him so that when the time comes that he chooses to get serious, you’ll be no threat whatsoever. And without you, you know this country would collapse. Personally, I think it was a mistake for the emperor to dress you up as some kind of hero, it doesn’t help our cause, it makes our most powerful weapon a liability. And we don’t bring liabilities into the battlefield.”

Even Laura stayed silent at the truths Don was attacking Jago with. Jago could do nothing to respond. *Is it really true*, he asked himself, *am I really that weak?*

“My problem with this strategy though,” Don rambled, “Is that if Lynn Forsigth decided right now to launch a personal assault on our country, we could do little to stop him. The both of you are like demons, you possess the fighting power of an entire army. I want your opinion on this Jago, how many soldiers do you think you could beat by yourself in our army?”

Jago was silent for a moment, he had a feeling that Don already knew the answer, “Honestly? I think that I could take our entire military on by myself. That’s not a boast either. This morning, I took on the entire Company in hand to hand combat alone. I beat every single one of them with only one hit, and they didn’t strike me once.”

Laura’s eyes nearly flew out of her head, “You can’t be serious!” She had seen how strong the Company was, she had even faced Shado in combat before, and she didn’t stand a chance against her.

Jago nodded, “I’m completely serious.”

Don sat down in Colonel Hughes’s chair and waved his hand in front of Jago, “Now you understand what the Colonel, the General, and I have to worry about, Laura. We’re trying to conduct a war here and we have a couple of Weapons of Mass Destruction here. If either army decided to, they could wipe out the other country in less than a week. It’s no different than holding a couple of warheads. Neither army can move, it’s a perfect stalemate, or so we hope. So we hold our cards and play normal war games while we try to figure out to do with these two.”

“But how?” Laura demanded, “How did they get so strong?”

Don smiled, “We have two legendary warriors here at play. On the one hand, we have the pupil of Roken Jiryuku, the Dragon of the East. And on the other hand, we have the son of Edaj Forsigth, the Tiger of

the West. You know, Lynn was born here in Irati, it was when he found out his heritage that he took up the ways of his father.”

Jago took a seat, “I didn’t know that. You’re sure of it? That he’s the son of the Ebony Tiger?”

“Whoops,” Don said mischievously, “Wasn’t supposed to let you know about that. The Colonel will have my hide on his wall for that slip up. But yes, Our network of spies is quite certain about this.”

“That makes this even worse!” Jago shouted angrily, “His father abandoned him and his mother when he was a child! He should hate Corva almost as much as I hate him!”

“And there’s a chance that he does, Jago,” Don replied, “But family does strange things to people, as you well know. I know that you’ve been told that Lynn is leading the Corvan army, but that’s not quite true. The truth is, his father is. And you and I both know that for as strong as Lynn is, even he isn’t quite as good as his father, just like you aren’t quite as strong as your master.”

“So what am I supposed to do?” Jago spluttered, “Just wait?!”

“Yes,” Don answered, “and train as much as you can. Because as it is now, you are not strong enough to defend this country. And that should scare you, because it scares the crap out of me.”

Jago walked out the office, his hopes shattered. Don was right, he did need to become stronger. The question was how? No one there was strong enough to give him a real challenge. He could hear Lynn’s voice laughing at him in the background, taunting him. Jago punched the wall with his fist, “DARN IT!! Am I really that weak? Am I just a burden to everyone here?” He walked angrily away in silence.

“Did you really mean all of what you said back there, Don?” Laura

asked as she reclined in a chair.

Don organized some papers at the colonel's desk, "Of course I did. I'm frightened out of my mind that the Ebony Tiger himself will come down on the land and reign judgement on us all. There would be nobody strong enough to stop him, Lord knows that. Except maybe Jago's master, but he would never agree to fight with us. For now, we bide our time, and hope our plan works out. The Alpha Gear should be ready to test in a few weeks, and maybe, just maybe, we'll finally be able to beat that demon. If not, then everyone is doomed."

Chapter 3

*Their struggle tore apart
the land. My home was
reduced to ashes, my
family crushed. I stood
still, covered with the
blood of my family*

- Herot Sengal: Iratian Citizen

Jago walked down a hallway back to where the Company was, his eyes downcast, his fists clenched. He paid no heed to anyone who walked by him, consumed in his own thoughts. Before he entered the conference room where the Company was, he hesitated.

I can't face my men like this, Jago thought solemnly, they're all anxious to fight, and I don't have it in me to tell them that I'm too weak to go onto the battlefield.

He walked away from the door, unsure of where to go.

Tyrn saw a silhouette pass by the door and got up. *That looked a lot like the Captain*, she thought as she walked over to the door. Seth was going over battle strategy in the conference room, exploring different situations and what they should do when they encounter something. Tyrn opened the door and caught a fleeting glance at Jago before he turned on a corner.

Something's up, she thought as she hurried after him.

Jago thought about Lynn, his heart turning to ice, bile building up in his mouth. All he could remember was that laugh, the laugh that had mocked Jago so many times. The laugh that stood over his friend

Jarom, over his other comrades, and now hung over him.

Don was right, he thought glumly, how could I have missed it? This hatred, it's not made me capable, but rather disabled me. Yet, I can't change how I feel, so how? How am I supposed to get stronger when all I can think is killing him?

Jago's thoughts were interrupted by a touch on the shoulder.

"Jago," Tyrn asked concernedly, "are you okay?"

Jago turned to look at her. He saw the worry in her eyes, the concern. His eyes darted to the ground, "Everything's fine. Nothing but gumdrops and ice-cream here."

"Did you talk to General Tomath or Colonel Hughes?" she inquired.

"They weren't available," Jago replied tersely turning away from her, "I ended up having to talk to Major Prida and Lieutenant Gioke."

Tyrn grabbed him again, making him look at her, "Did they deny your request to go on the battlefield?" Tyrn asked, "Is that why you're upset?"

Jago took her arm off of his shoulder, though he kept holding her hand, "That's not the problem. I just learned the truth. And that can be really hard to hear sometimes."

Tyrn grabbed Jago's other hand with her's, "Did Laura rip into you again? She can be a little frustrating at times."

"No, I can handle whatever she throws at me," Jago chuckled dejectedly, "No, I just learned what the Colonel and the General really think of me."

"And what's that?"

He looked into her eyes, “That I’m weak. That to them, I’m no more than a liability to this country. And if he so chooses, Lynn could not only kill me, but everyone as well.”

“Well, you know that’s not true,” she comforted Jago.

“Do I?” Jago retorted, “No, I know what he said was true, which is why I’m like this.”

He let his fingers slip away from hers, clenching his fists, “I struggle so hard, so hard! Every day, and yet, he’s always one step ahead of me!” He was barely keeping his voice under control. “Whenever I think of him, all I can feel is hate. All other emotions are blocked out. I can’t sleep at night because of him. All I hear is his mocking laughter, threatening to destroy me, and all I can do is watch.”

“Jago...” Tyrn said in concern, her other words failing her.

He grabbed her shoulders, “How do you do it Tyrn?”

She was startled, his eyes were pleading for an answer, “How do I do what?” she asked, puzzled.

“You told me that your parents died in the invasion, same as mine. But everytime I see you, you are always strong, always able to fight, never giving up, never despairing. How do you keep on going, without amassing hatred?”

Tyrn sighed and pulled her arms around Jago in an embrace, “I think of them, not broken or bleeding. But as I knew them, kind, gentle, loving. It helps me remember that I’m still their daughter. And I know that I have people around me to care about, who look out for me.”

Jago wrapped his arms around her body, accepting her hug. “It’s so hard to not hate, I can hardly breathe every time I think about him. My

heart constricts, my blood boils.”

“I don’t hate the man who killed my parents,” Tyrn said in barely more than a whisper, “I’m sad when I think about him, true, but I know that he was just a pawn in a larger game. At first, I did hate him, but I let it go, because it was affecting who I was, and my parents didn’t want me to be vengeful.”

“I want to...” Jago struggled, “to remove myself of this hate, but I just can’t. He’s there, always mocking me, kicking me when I’m down. I don’t know if I can be like you...”

He held her tightly, “But I’m going to try my best.”

“And I’ll be here to help you out.”

They held each other for a few more moments before releasing.

“Thanks Tyrn,” Jago thanked, “I appreciate your help.”

“It’s no problem at all,” Tyrn blushed, “We should probably get back to the conference room. You’ll have to tell the others what happened.”

Jago nodded, and they walked back. *Everything always seems easier when I have Tyrn around,* Jago thought as he walked, *I don’t know what I’d do without her.*

Chapter 4

*I stood beneath the
shadows of two giants.
Their power
overwhelming, their battle
earth shattering.*

- Lagneb Gerit: Corvan Civilian

The days passed slowly. Jago trained, trying hard to improve himself. Yet he could still feel the gap, the chasm that separated Lynn and himself. This frustrated him even more, and it was in those moments of frustration that he begun to make breakthroughs. By the end of the week he was hardly thinking about Lynn at all.

Jago browsed through his wardrobe. There wasn't much variety. After a hard, long week, he finally had an opportunity to go on a date with Tyrm. He was nervous. His stomach kept flipping over and over, and he kept pacing around his room, thinking what to say and do. After a few minutes of debate, he settled on a black buttoned down shirt with a crimson tie and a pair of jeans. It wasn't casual, but it wasn't formal either.

He went over his notes for the date, having written several contingency plans as well. He had it memorized. By the time he had finished getting ready, there was still an hour until their date.

Jago paced up and down his apartment, *Man, I haven't been this nervous since I last faced Lynn in battle*, he thought. *It's been so long since I've been on a date, that I don't know what to do.*

Jago kept up this line of action until fifteen minutes before his date. At that point, he shot down a glass of water before jumping onto his

hovercycle, leaving his front door wide open. As Jago got to Tyrn's place, his mind was in a frenzy. It had only taken him five minutes to get there.

Crap! I thought the traffic was going to be much worse, he thought as he arrived. Now what do I do? She probably can see me from her window and is wondering why I'm here so early. I better circle around the block just in case.

Jago kept circling around the block for another seven minutes, praying that Tyrn wouldn't see him. He had thought that his stomach was doing flips beforehand, but it compared nothing to the gymnastics that was occurring then. He felt a little sick. Finally, after seven minutes of running around in circles, Jago decided to park.

He struggled to get out of the hovercycle, his arms and legs extremely stiff and jittery. His foot caught on his seat and fell forward on the ground. He quickly got back up and brushed himself off.

Good thing no one was around to see that, he thought as he walked up to Tyrn's door. He struggled for a minute and then finally got the courage to ring the doorbell. He only had to wait a few seconds before Tyrn opened the door.

Tyrn was breathtaking. She wore an elegant crimson dress that seemed to dance in the slow breeze. Her hair was down and styled into waves. Her bright sky blue eyes had never seemed brighter. Jago couldn't keep his eyes off her.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked, awed.

Tyrn smiled, "Yep. It's been forever since I went dancing. This will be so much fun."

"I thought you were breathtaking beforehand," Jago complemented,

“but I think you just might cause me to have a heart attack ”

Tyrn’s face was almost as red as her face, “Thank you,” she spluttered, “You look great, too.”

Before jumping onto the hovercycle; however, Tyrn stopped Jago, “Wait a second.”

Jago was startled, hoping that he hadn’t done anything wrong, “What is there something wrong?”

Tyrn grabbed his collar and unbuttoned his top button and released some of the slack in his tie. “Much better, you just looked so uptight with that.”

Jago blushed furiously and straightened his tie, “Well, we better get going,” he said as he helped Tyrn onto her seat.

“How’s your evening been,” Jago asked as they flew through the sky.

“WHAT?” Tyrn shouted back unable to hear.

Jago just shrugged his shoulders and kept flying. Once they had reached the dance hall, he asked again, “How was your evening?”

“Oh. It was fine. But it seems like tonight will be a lot of fun,” she grinned up at him.

He grinned back, holding her arm, “That’s for sure. With me around, there’s never a dull moment.”

“That’s for sure,” Tyrn muttered under her breath.

As they walked into the dance hall arm in arm, a soft song was being performed by the band playing. It was a slow love song, and

couples everywhere were dancing across the floor.

“May I?” Jago asked as he grabbed her hand.

Tyrn curtsied, “You may.”

They moved across the floor, dancing slowly. Their movements were fluid, their steps perfect. Both were expert dancers.

“Where’d you learn to dance?” Tyrn asked as he twirled around.

Jago smiled, “Oh, here a little, there a little. How about yourself, I’ve never seen someone move so smoothly before.”

“Before I joined the army, I was a dance major,” she replied.

“Really?” Jago asked surprised, “I didn’t know you were such a big fan.”

Tyrn nodded, “Mhm. That and shooting are some of my favorite things to do.”

Jago chuckled, “Those two can’t be more different from each other. Yet you seem to masters of both.”

Tyrn looked up trying to recollect, “Well, my mother always wanted me to dance. And my father wanted to make sure that I knew how to protect himself.”

“Well Miss Ridner, it seems to me that they’ve succeeded in both.”

“What about you, Jago? Where did you really learn to dance?” she asked, interested.

Jago smiled mischievously, “Honestly?”

“Yes.”

“Well,” Jago explained as he pulled her down in a dip, “my master had me practice steps for fighting positions. I just adapted those here.”

Tyrn was surprised, “Really? That’s incredible!”

Jago blushed, “Well, you know, dancing’s not too different from fighting, and all dancing is slow enough for me to catch on quick enough to their patterns.”

Tyrn thought for a moment, *he really is incredible. Even something like this he can pull with the greatest of ease.*

Jago kept dancing with Tyrn, flowing through the stage. *I hope she’s buying my crap,* Jago thought as he danced, *I don’t remember the last time I danced. If I hadn’t seen the other couples dancing before I asked her to, I would have been totally screwed.*

As the night progressed, they got to know more about each other. They were outperforming all of the other dancers on the floor. As they glided across the floor the night grew late.

“I don’t remember when I had this much fun,” Tyrn said breathlessly, her face glistening with sweat.

“I don’t know if I’ve ever had this much fun,” Jago replied. He wasn’t tired at all, and hadn’t worked up a sweat.

As the band finished their song, the lead singer grabbed the microphone.

“We’d like to thank all the people out there, who came and supported us tonight. It seems like everyone had a good time,” the crowd cheered in agreement. “This’ll be our last song of tonight, and we’d like to spotlight a couple that has totally brought their game to the table.”

A spotlight shone on both Tyrn and Jago, “Let’s give these good

people a round of applause.” The crowd clapped and cheered again. “Let’s see if you guys can keep up with them.”

Jago and Tyrn looked at each other in surprise. The band started to play the song. They just shrugged their shoulders and started to dance. The crowd watched in amazement at the speed and enthusiasm of their dance. As the song progressed, their moves got more and more complicated. As the song hit the chorus, only Jago and Tyrn remained dancing. The entire crowd was shouting along with the lyrics, cheering the two of them on. The song kept speeding up, and their flurry of dance moves did as well. As the end of the song approached, Jago threw Tyrn into the air, catching her in a dip. The crowd ate it up.

“What great sports they are!” the lead singer shouted, “Let’s give them one more round of applause.” The crowd happily went along, “And what would you know folks! That’s Captain Jago Kale and Lieutenant Tyrn Ridner. Let’s give them one more round of applause. They’re real heroes!”

The people in the crowd were stunned. Both of them had celebrity status among the people there. Everyone started to clamor around them.

“I thinks that’s our cue to leave!” Jago exclaimed as he rushed out of the dance hall, pulling Tyrn with him.

As they both escaped the crowd, they started to laugh.

“That was so much fun!” Tyrn said, “I didn’t know that I was popular among them as well.”

“Are you kidding me?” Jago asked, “They love you more than they do me.”

“I’m glad we got out of there before we were hounded by them,”

Tyrn sighed.

“Yeah, it’s late enough as it is,” Jago said checking his watch. “It’s past 1:30.”

“Really?” Tyrn said shocked, “It felt like were hardly spent any time in there at all.”

“Time really flies when you have someone to spend it with,” Jago said shrugging.

The sky broke with thunder, and it started to sprinkle on them. Tyrn started to laugh again.

“Great!” Tyrn said, “I’m glad it’s summer. This is nice.”

Jago scratched his head, “Yeah, but now we’re going to get drenched as we get home.”

Tyrn punched his shoulder, “Nothing that Captain Jago Kale can’t handle though, right?”

Jago grinned, “For sure. I was more worried about you.”

Tyrn through her hands up in the air, “No need to worry about me, I’m great! In fact I feel more than great! I feel spectacular!”

Jago chuckled, “Well, regardless of the rain or not, we should probably head home.”

As they flew in the air on Jago’s hovercycle, the rain started to come down hard.

I can hardly see, Jago thought as he flew the air. *I’d better stop for a moment to get better bearings.* He stopped in the middle of the air.

“My GPS lost connection, give me a second while I try to figure out

where we are,” Jago told Tyrn, “I can’t even tell what street we’re hovering over.”

Tyrn looked concerned and looked at the dark buildings. “I think where in the Azon district, it’s southwest of my house.”

“Hmm,” Jago contemplated, “I think actually that we’re in the Bidol district, which would put us more north than south of your place. Sorry for getting us lost.”

“Your fine,” Tyrn said, “I’m just worried about the rain. It’s really starting to come down.”

Jago reached down near his left leg and opened a compartment. He pulled out a small antenna and attached it to the front of his cycle.

“This should boost the signal. Just give it a moment to boot up. In the meantime, I guess we should just wait.”

Tyrn pulled her body closer into Jago’s, “You know Jago. I think this is the happiest I’ve ever seen you before. You really enjoyed tonight, didn’t you.”

Jago looked back at her and smiled, “That’s for sure. I don’t remember the last time I smiled for reals.”

Tyrn smiled back at him, “You should do it more. It suits you.”

“Yeah,” Jago’s smile slowly faded, “It’s just that I haven’t had much to smile about before now.”

Tyrn squeezed Jago’s body, “I know, but you can rest assured that I’ll have your back.”

“Thanks Tyrn,” Jago said his smile returning, “I really appreciate it.”

“You know Jago, it’s not just me who is praying for you to succeed. Seth, Jaled, Ben, all of them care about you. And whatever problems you may be facing, we are here for you, no matter what. You don’t have to face him alone.”

Jago pondered about that for a moment, unable to respond. The GPS beeped back to life.

“It’s done,” he said pulling his eyes back forward, “It seems both of us were wrong. We actually already passed your place, we’re in the Liple district. If we go directly east, we should make it back in a few minutes.”

As they finally reached Tyrn’s place, the rain started to let up, dying out in a slow drizzle. As Jago walked up to the door, Tyrn stopped.

She held one arm awkwardly and dropped her gaze to the ground, “Thanks for the amazing night Jago, we definitely need to do something like this again.”

Jago put one arm behind his head, “That’s for sure. How about the same time next week?”

“Sounds like a date,” she said grinning up at him.

Jago dropped his arms and grabbed Tyrn’s hands, “Hey, I just want to thank you for all the help that you’ve provided this past week. I know I’m not the easiest person to work with, but it has really helped me a lot.”

Tyrn stared into his eyes, they were softer than ever know, an earthy brown, “I don’t mind. You’re not just my partner, you know. You really mean alot to me.”

Jago gazed into Tyrn’s bright jade eyes, “You mean a lot to me, too,

Tyrn. More than you could ever know.” He closed the distance between their two bodies.

Tyrn looked in anticipation and closed her eyes. Jago started to lean in, his heart pounding, his cheeks burning. Tyrn had dreamed of this moment for so long, but never thought it would ever happen. She was surprisingly calm, the blush and embarrassment completely gone.

Jago stopped, his lips right in front of Tyrn’s. Tyrn could feel his warm breath. She started to lean further, her lips brushing his.

Suddenly, both Jago and Tyrn’s phones started to ring, interrupting the silence between them. Jago didn’t care; he moved forward into bliss.

After a few moments, their phones started to ring again. Their lips broke.

“Sorry,” Jago said as he grabbed his phone, “It has to be pretty important for someone to call us at this time of night.”

“I know,” Tyrn said, blushing. *Why did someone have to ruin our moment?* she thought furiously.

“What?” she demanded of her caller, while Jago simultaneously said, “Hello?”

They both listened in silence to their speakers. Their expressions changed from frustration to shock. Jago didn’t let his caller finish, he hung up his phone. Tyrn did the same.

“They’ve struck,” Jago said, “I never thought they’d get past the front.”

“I know,” Tyrn replied, “And so many of them.”

“We’ve got to get back to the base as fast as we can,” Jago said

running to his hovercycle. Tyrn jumped on the back with him.

“They could finish half of Atoli before we even respond,” Jago said as they flew through the air.

“How’d they let 10,000 units get past them?” Tyrn asked, “That’s two full brigades.”

Jago flew as fast as he could, “I don’t know,” he shouted, “But if we don’t hurry, millions of innocent people could die.”

Chapter 5

*The sky rained down blood
upon us. My friends, my
comrades... They are all
dead.*

- Opus Sarev: Corvan Soldier

Jago and Tyrn rushed into the Atoli compound, their clothes still dripping wet. Brigadier General Sunah Tomath was waiting for them. He was a hard man, in his early 40s, his hair starting to gray. He had several scars on his face, his eyes hard and icy blue. He was over two meters tall, his shoulders as broad as an ox. He regarded the two of them.

“Captain, Lieutenant, thank you for getting here so quickly,” General Tomath expressed, “It seems that Corva finally decided to strike us at the heart.”

Jago looked around the dark corridor, “Are we the first ones here?”

“Yes, but all other officers have been summoned as well,” the general replied.

“How many soldiers do we have on the base?” Tyrn asked.

General Tomath ran his hand through his hair, “We only have Colonel Hughes brigade stationed here, so there’ll be 3,000 soldiers.”

“That’s less than half of the enemy forces!” Tyrn exclaimed, “And they’ve totally caught us by surprise.”

General Tomath looked grimly at the ground. He knew it as well as they. There would be many casualties during the night.

“They’ve been awakened, right?” Jago asked, “We have to get out there right away. Which company is currently handling the enemy forces?”

Tomath nodded, “Yes, all soldiers are awake, and are scrambling to get into their Leviathans. Only Captain Mado is out there right now.”

Jago clenched his fists and dropped his gaze. Captain Glen Mado was a good woman, and a great soldier. She stood no chance out there.

“I’ve got to get out there right away!” Jago shouted running down the hall way, “It’ll only be a few minutes before she’s overrun by the enemy forces!”

“Wait!” Tomath commanded, “Come back here! We need to strategize first. It’ll be no help to Glen if you rush out without a plan. Get dressed, and meet me in the briefing room. I’ll be waiting in the briefing room.”

Jago hesitated, he knew General Tomath was right.

“Tyrr, come on, let’s go!” He called out for her, “We have to go as quickly as possible.”

“Right,” she replied, running after him.

They went to their company barracks and dressed in their uniforms. They hurried back to the briefing room. They were the only ones there.

Where are they? Jago thought impatiently as he paced up and down the room.

General Tomath burst into the room with Colonel Roy Hughes. Hughes was in his mid 30s, a slender man, and rather short, standing at 1.60 meters. He was a gentle soul, a passive man that liked to rely on

his subordinates to make decisions for him.

“Jago, Tyrn, I’m glad to see you two,” he huffed, trying to catch his breath, “Don, Laura, Jin, Yuri, and Rika will be joining us shortly.”

“What about the other Captains?” Jago inquired, “Aren’t they coming as well?”

Tomath interjected, “I just sent them to their companies. Glen is in desperate need of assistance.”

Jago slammed his fist on a nearby table, “I should be out there with them! What am I doing here?!”

“Calm down Jago, we need you here. Your company will be needed for an assault. The rest of the companies were sent out to defend the city,” General Tomath explained.

Jago stopped, his protest dying out in his throat. He knew it would do no good to argue with the general. He would just have to wait until the others arrived. He tried to not think of his comrades dying out in the field. He folded his arms and leaned up against a wall near Tyrn and looked at her. She stared back at him, her brows furrowed, her eyes hinting of concern. *What a way to end a date*, he thought as he waited.

One by one, the Lieutenant Colonel and the Majors started to trickle in. As Major Prida saw Jago, she offered her protest, “What’s he doing here?! He should be out there fighting!”

Lieutenant Colonel Gioke cut in front of her, “Now, now Laura. I’m sure the General knows best. We should just take our seats. I know that it’s 2:30 in the morning.”

Laura grumbled and took her seat. *What’s her problem?* Jago thought as he saw her sit down.

General Tomath stood at the front of the room and started to talk, “Okay Soldiers, listen up. At 0200 hours, our radar technicians picked up a disturbance right outside the Atoli province, coming in from the southwest. The company on patrol, Captain Mado’s company, reported ten dropships descending out of the sky, dropping roughly 10,000 enemy Leviathan’s on the field. At this point, it is unknown if there are more dropships, but our reports indicate that enemy if focusing on a full frontal assault, with the attack solely coming from the southwest.

“According to Captain Mado, the enemy units did not break off, but still remains in a two brigade formation, the first brigade cutting off the river, the second brigade assaulting the electromagnetic barricade that keeps them from directly assaulting the city. Now, as of yet, we have heard no reports of them getting through; however, due to their numbers, we must assume the rest. Captain Mado will not hold them long, and we need to make sure that they do not destroy that barricade. This is our primary objective.

“As such, since we are only limited to one brigade ourselves, we are going to break off into battalions, with Lieutenant Colonel Gioke leading a 2,000 manned battalion to attack the enemy’s second brigade. Major Kenda, Major Sori, you will help form this battalion with Major Prida’s forces.”

Yuri Kenda and Rika Sora nodded and started whispering amongst themselves.

“The captains you manage have already been sent out to the field with this knowledge. You’ll be outnumbered two to one here, so be sure to take advantage of your surroundings. Remember, this is our land.

“As for you Major Syke, you’ll be taking your battalion and captains to the enemy’s first brigade. If they follow the river, it’ll lead

them straight through the heart of the city, with the grates being its only line of defense. It is imperative that you take them head on. I know that you're outnumbered five to one here, but I can't afford to let even one unit escape into the city."

Jin Syke gulped, he knew it was practically suicide. Even though he was regarded as the most experienced Major, he had little hopes of holding them off.

"This is why I'm assigning Captain Kale's company to assist you. They shall attack them from the rear, and shall be the true force to stop them. Hopefully, with a slight element of surprise, he shall crush them."

General Tomath looked at Jago, "You think you can handle it son?"

Jago looked at Tyrn, sweat was dripping down her face, and looked back at the general, "We'll be fine General. My men are more than capable."

General Tomath saluted them, "Excellent. Godspeed captain, you're going to need it."

Everyone in the room saluted back, "Thank you General," Jago replied as he and Tyrn exited the room, quickly moving down the hall to the Leviathan Bay.

"Everyone will already be waiting for us outside, so I'll see you soon, Tyrn," Jago said as they entered the bay.

"Right," Tyrn responded, she hesitated before turning to go to her Leviathan, "Jago, be careful out there."

Jago turned his back and waved his arm at her, "You know I will be."

As he reached the Axial he shouted, "Axial, open! Authorization

560206.”

The Axial’s internal computer responded, a soft electronic female voice, “Authorization accepted, opening.” The front of the Axial transformed, opening up to allow Jago to fit inside. As he did so, the Axial closed again.

The heads up display inside the visor roared to life, displaying Jago’s vitals, the amount of power left in the Axial, and the general condition of the various parts of the suits. A twenty second diagnostic checked each part, releasing the vents, checking the rockets and the weapon’s system. The Axial’s internal computer system stated, “All systems are online.”

Jago crouched in the Axial, and the rockets on the feet and legs roared to life. “GO!” he shouted as a hatch opened above him, the Axial rocketing into the night sky.

He flew high into the sky, above the clouds, flying in loops while performing a series of punches and kicks to make sure the Axial was loose. He released the rockets and started to plummet downwards. Right before he crashed into the ground, he twisted in the air, activating the rockets, and landed softly.

Perfect, he thought, *everything is running smoothly*. Tyrn dropped down next to him in her Leviathan, the Royal, a few moments later.

“All systems are functioning and I’m ready to go,” she responded through her comms, “Let’s get this show on the road.”

“Right,” he acknowledged, “Company Ka Shin Ko, this is Captain Kale. Please respond.”

One by one, all of the soldiers responded.

“This’ll be a nasty one, I reckon,” Seth voiced, excited, “It’s been far too long since I’ve had any fun.”

“Fun for you, maybe,” Jaled chided, “I’ll have to cover your butt the entire night to prevent you from killing yourself, stupid kid.”

“I heard the odds, Jago,” Mishti interjected, “five to one. Do you think we stand a chance?”

“We’ll be fine,” he replied, “Where is everyone at? Lieutenant Ridner and I will come join you.”

“We’re about a mile south of the base,” Ilel answered, “but wouldn’t you rather meet us near the battlefield? Captain Mado is running out of time.”

Jago and Tyrrn took off towards them, “No, I rather we all group up first. Besides, our company won’t even be interacting with hers. We’re headed your way.”

“What do you think, Jago,” Orlo asked, “will we need to use everyone today?”

“Most undoubtedly. However, I’ll still keep the focus on us twelve officers. I’d really like to avoid any casualties.”

“Who do you think drew the shorter stick,” Bors joked nervously, “us or Major Syke’s battalion?”

“It doesn’t matter either way,” Roso cut in, “We’re screwed regardless.”

Jago jumped in, “What kind of talk is that?! We’re the cream of the crop. The Corvan better be ready for us, because we’ll give them more than just a fair share of trouble.”

Jago and Tyrn started to slow down and descend, “Anyways, get ready to go.” They landed on the ground, “We’re here.”

Everyone was lined up in a row. special. Ilek manned a versatile reconnaissance and espionage division, whose Leviathan’s were cloaked with retroreflective panels, to make them invisible. They weren’t as durable as the other Levi Each sergeant controlled a platoon of twenty, except for Mishti, who oversaw all of the lower sergeants. Each platoon had Leviathans that matched their sargeant’s closely. Ilek’s and Bors’s platoons were athans, but they made up for it with their element of surprise and stealth. Ilek’s platoon was quite the opposite, a commando unit, used primarily for heavy combat and front-line reconnaissance. Their Leviathan’s were heavy plated and bulky, but retained the same flexibility and movement of a normal Leviathan. They would be taking most of the heavy fire in the night’s fight.

Jago looked at his company, the true Leviathan Company, and smiled with pride. He was confident in their abilities, despite what Roso had said. He knew that they could handle themselves. Of course, he would be the one who did the heavy hitting, making sure no one died.

“Men,” Jago said, “today we will prove to the Corvan’s what a great unit looks like. They dared to attack us on our home land, on our very turf!” He paused, and started to walk down the lines in between the units, “We shall show them what a mistake this was. Each one of you is worth five of them, and by the time this battle is over, all shall know the strength of the Leviathan Company.”

The soldiers saluted him in unison. Tensions were high, there was no cheering or applause. Every man knew the dangers involved.

“Move Out!” Jago commanded as everyone rocketed into the air.

Chapter 6

*He moved like lightning,
his body was surrounded
by a power that I had
never seen. It was like
magic.*

- Bors Grund: Iratian Sergeant

Jago surveyed the enemy units. They had moved with perfect stealth behind them, hiding in the glades next to the river. Jago had ordered comm silence except for himself and the fellow officers in the Company. He didn't want to give their position away accidentally. Behind him, Ilel's platoon awaited for their orders. They were going to charge with him.

The Corvan units were focused on Major Sykes's battlements. They were putting up a good fight, but they definitely needed assistance. The emerald and aqua Leviathans, that were the Corvan's, started to overcome the crimson and white of the Irati's. Jago couldn't wait any longer; he had to issue the attack.

"Tyrrn," he whispered through his comms, in a private line between the two of them, "I want you to remain behind with the other units until I issue the second wave."

"Sir," she replied curtly, "You need someone to have your back."

He turned to look at her Leviathan, "I need you here. It'll be key to our attack that we have strong sense of command. I can't risk your injury."

"Jago, you can't keep me out of this," she stated, cocking her rifle.

“That’s an order. See what you can do with the other rifleman about picking officers off. I’ll need your help.”

Tyrn shook her head. She was about to argue further, but decided against it. She was still tired from their night of dancing. She couldn’t afford to make any mistakes on the battlefield.

“Yes sir,” she responded while thinking, *Jago, I hope you can take of yourself tonight. I won’t be right there with you.*

Jago stared at Tyrn, wanting to tell her the true reason he was making her stay. *The truth is Tyrn, he thought, I don’t think that I can bear losing you too.*

“Okay men,” he broadcasted through the comms, “let’s go. FOR THE EMPIRE!!!!”

They charged forward into the battlefield, completely catching the Corvan soldiers off guard. They tore through the enemy units with their rifles, and their phase sword, not hesitating. The corvan scout drones flying overhead, were shot down by the riflemen Tyrn was leading.

Jago leapt through each enemy unit, hate no longer motivating him. He had something to protect, now. Someone to protect. His body pulsed with electricity, with excitement. He moved like a dance, his enemies not able to do anything against him.

He flew into a group of forty units, all shooting at him. He bobbed and weaved and flipped through their fire, taking down each unit with only one strike. More and more Corvan units started to focus their attention on him and Ilek’s platoon. They completely ignored the riflemen and the other units from the company.

Excellent, Jago thought as he tore through the enemy lines, they’ll be so focused on me that they won’t have time to deal with the others.

However, he clapped his hands together, sparks flying out of his hands, *I need to grab all of their attention*. He placed his hand on the ground and the field around him erupted. It was as if a powerful explosion had detonated.

Jago stood in a small crater, enemy Corvan units strewn across the field. About a hundred units were taken out from the blast. The Corvans hesitated, hundreds of units turning on Jago. Now they had seen just how powerful he could be.

They started to fire at him with everything they had, grenades, rifle shots, shotgun blasts, EMPs, and a horde of various weaponry. Jago took this to his advantage. With every grenade that was sent to him, he'd kick it back to where it came from. He'd dodge the bullets, only for them to hit the Corvan units. No one could lay a finger on him.

He fought like a dragon through their ranks, never using a weapon of his own. His fists started to glow as he punched through the units, the air around him started to grow heavy, so much so that the Corvans could feel the difference in pressure when they came near him.

Jago moved as quick as lightning, never looking back after he had struck someone. The Corvan Leviathan's fell apart in his hands. Their strong armor held no defense for his fists. The units started to pile up on the ground around him, the units around him started to thin.

Jago had a hard time stepping on clean ground. He had to clear the area around him of the broken bodies and suits. He clapped his hands again, taking a short deep breath through his nose, and pushed his hand away from his body. A shock wave pulsed out from his body, pushing everything around him into the air. Only the muddy terrain remained.

The Corvans looked in horror as their fallen comrades fell out of the

sky to them, a hundred meters away from where Jago was standing. Some lost control and started to charge him, enraged at the callousness at which he had treated their fallen. They tried to attack him with phase swords instead of guns, hoping at least one of the high frequency vibrating blades would scratch him.

Their hopes were in vain. Jago's moves were so fluid, so elegant, so fast, that it made it seem as if they were nothing more than slow moving statues. He grabbed the sword out of each hand that tried to cut him, and threw it at any who tried to attack him. As the last unit that charged him fell, the others surrounding him dropped their weapons. They knew that they were no match for him.

Jago shot a small pellet from his wrist into the air above him. It was a large scale EMP that Mishti had developed. The pellet burst, and arcs of electricity shot out everywhere surrounding him. All of the units who had dropped their weapons fell down, immobilized. *No sense in leaving their Leviathans functional*, Jago thought as he flew off into another part of the battle.

Through the comms, the company cheered him on. Their resolve strengthened and they pushed forward with even more vigor. The Corvan were completely surprised. No longer did they have the advantage of fighting five to one, rather it quickly dropped to four to one, then three to one, then two to one. The Corvan officer in charge of his battalion knew that they were losing. They hadn't broke through nearly any of the Irati units. He looked at Jago. He moved like a demon, carving death wherever he struck. He knew that he had to take him down himself, despite whatever chance he had on winning.

He charged at Jago, dropping his weapon in the process. Like Jago, he relied on hand-to-hand combat as his strength. He shouted rocketing

forward through the air at Jago. Jago caught his blow in mid-air. The air pushed back at their collision, cracking the ground.

The Corvan officer stared in wonder at Jago's reaction. *There's no way*, he thought as Jago threw him on the ground. The force at which he threw him was incredible. Had he not been highly trained, he wouldn't have been able to rebound. Right before he landed on the ground, he flipped and rocketed back towards Jago.

Jago looked in anticipation at the oncoming Corvan officer. That was the first person of the night who had not been taken down with one strike. He was impressed. It was not often that someone offered a real challenge, not that this joker did.

They clashed in midair, moving at almost supersonic speeds, throwing punches and kicks at each other. Jago blocked every attack that the Corvan officer threw at him, responding with only the weakest of his attacks. He wanted this battle to last. This man was the battalion leader, and if he took him down, they would essentially win.

Most of the battle down below them had ceased, as everyone was staring at their fight. Ilek's platoon kept fighting, they knew better than to watch Jago as he fought. They took advantage of the shock and awe of their enemies, taking them out with relative ease.

"Let's go men!" Ilek shouted, "Hold nothing back!"

The men shouted in reply and pushed forward. As they carved their way through their enemies, Jago and the Corvan officer fought overhead. The officer was getting tired, his breath short, his lungs burning.

Jago grinned under his suit, he could tell the Corvan officer was slipping. He was slower than before. He hacked into the officer's

comms, “You’re pretty good. What is your name.”

“You haven’t destroyed my dignity enough for me to answer,” the officer replied, his voice haggard.

“Oh,” Jago taunted, “too bad. Now,” he grabbed the officer out of the air, “tell me. Where is Lynn Forsigh?”

The officer started laughing, “Now I know who you are, skrall. Go ahead and kill me, but the Emerald Tiger will always elude you.”

Jago flashed in irritation, “You know him! Now, tell me!!” He gripped tighter, the Leviathan being crushed under his fingers.

The officer coughed and continued to laugh, “You don’t scare me, skrall. You’re nothing more than a cub to him... You’ll never be able to beat him, Jago Kale.”

Jago’s arm spasmed in anger, gripping the man dangerously tight. His rage for Lynn started to rise, almost bursting out of control.

“I could kill you,” he said his voice ice-cold, “but I’m not like him.”

He brought his other fist down on the man, knocking him out. He dropped down to the ground, and threw the man down on the ground. He looked at the battlefield, it was over. They had completely destroyed the other side. Only a few hundred soldiers remained as prisoners from the Corvan.

“Who’s still left?” Jago asked through his comms.

“Everyone from the company survived,” Ilel replied, “This was a complete victory from our side.”

“What about you Major?” Jago asked concerned, “How are you holding up?”

“I’ll live,” Jin replied, his voice pained, “just a few scrapes and bruises.”

Jago surveyed the fallen units, “How many men did you lose?”

“Only forty-eight,” Jin sighed.

Jago trembled in anger, “Only?! Forgive me Jin, I should have intervened sooner. I may have been able to prevent it.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jin replied, “those men died with honor.” He looked at his fallen comrades and smiled, “Each man knew what he was getting into when we came out here tonight.”

Jago knelt down on one knee, in respect for the dead. *Forgive me*, he thought as he saw the fallen Iranian soldiers. He lifted his eyes determined. *The battle may be done here*, he thought, *but I bet the others could really use our help*.

“Colonel Hughes,” he said through his comms, “The location at B has been secured. Do you need any assistance at A?”

“That was quick, Jago” Roy replied, “you’ve been out here only twenty minutes.”

“Do you need any help?” he repeated.

Jago could hear Roy sigh, “Well, it’s not going very well for us. Our soldiers are barely holding off the Corvans from destroying the generator. We’ve lost approximately 400 men already.”

“We’ll come right away,” Jago stated, then turning to the company, “We have to help them out. They’re losing.”

The Company gathered around him, each of the eleven officers were tired. They had been fighting hard out on the battlefield, not to mention

sleep deprived. But each of them stood with pride next to their Captain, ready to take on their next nightmare.

“You don’t mind if I leave the rest of the company here?” Jago asked Jin.

“What?!” He splurged, “You plan on taking those eleven with you?!”

“The others have done their duties, I can’t expect any more of them than what they’ve already done.”

They started to fly off, “Besides. They won’t be necessary.”

Jin Sykes stared in frustration as they flew off, *They’re going to get themselves killed one day with their overconfidence.*

“Are you sure we’ll be alright?” Tyrn asked Jago concernedly, “I know the odds are better for us this time, but they’ll see us coming from a mile away.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, “this fight was over before it began.”

Enemy fire ripped past them in the air, the closer they got to the barrier. They were still outside it, which would be a disadvantage to them. Anti aircraft weapons could target them out of the sky.

“Fly low,” he commanded trying to avoid the mortars, “We’re almost there.”

They careened into the battlefield, upheaving the Corvan soldiers around them. Shado carved a spot for them to land with her twin phase swords. They formed a circle around themselves as they landed, back to back with each other. They had done this a hundred times, no one stood a chance against them.

Jago looked beyond where they were standing and saw all of their fallen compatriots. His body flared with rage. He saw one particular Leviathan he recognized. It laid in tatters next to a broken body. He could recognize Glen's long, flowing red hair. Her lifeless eyes stared out into the sky. Jago's body shook with anger. He would avenge her.

He charged forward away from the Company's circle, screaming. The Company was used to this. They tightened up their attack. Jago moved forward, attacking, not really feeling. It was all so meaningless, this war. Every death, every kill, was just another waste of human life. But he couldn't stop, not while he breathed, not while he lived. Lynn's face kept haunting him, threatening to destroy him. So Jago weaved, he weaved through the Corvan units, not caring about whether he lived or died. He tried, but couldn't get his face out of his mind. He slashed through the units, not even knowing what he was doing. Finally he was able to get Lynn's face out of his mind. He looked back at the damage he had caused, and dropped to his knees in shock.

Several thousand Corvan units lay dead near him. His Company waited a few hundred meters from him. They hadn't seen him like this before. They knew that he was impossibly strong, but he took out over two thousand men in just a couple of minutes. The enemies around them were gone. Tyrn approached Jago.

She put her hand on his shoulder, "Jago, are you okay?"

He looked up at her, his eyes pleading for relief. His mind snapped back to reality, to Tyrn, erasing all thoughts of Lynn. "I'm fine," Jago replied, "How is everyone?"

"We're good, Captain," Seth replied, "These Corvan scum are just flies to us."

Jago got back onto his feet, his arms and shoulders tensed, “I’m going to stop this fight right now.”

“There’s still over 2,000 Corvan units left, what are you going to do?” Jaled scoffed, “Kill them like you did these men. We saw you Jago, it was like you weren’t human. No one’s soul comes through that unscathed.”

“I’ll do what I must,” Jago replied.

He took a deep breath and clapped his hands together. Arcs of electricity surrounded the Axial. He pulled his right hand back. His hand started to glow gold. The pressure around him increased again. The sky seemed to darken. Small debris started to jump off of the ground into the air. He could feel the power flow through his body, threatening to destroy him. It was a torrent, penetrating every crevice of his being, every pore, every cell. His body started to vibrate violently.

He took a step forward, a large crack and a soft boom following him, and propelled himself towards the enemy. He could no longer hear, and he could barely see. But that didn’t matter. He knew where the enemy was.

He thrust his hand forward, and tried to shout, “HIKARI NO RYU KEN!!!!!!”

A giant, burning blue dragon erupted from his hands, spanning hundreds of meters. It crackled and sizzled with energy, roaring loudly. The Corvan units were turned to dust as the dragon enveloped them. The ground cracked and ground; large parts of the land flew up out of the ground and disintegrated. Jago struggled to keep control over it. The dragon started to distort and it exploded.

A giant fireball engulfed the land, licking up trees, grass, and the

various life forms there. The shock wave that followed it pushed everyone back. A giant mushroom cloud sprouted overhead and blue, billowing smoke covered the battlefield. As the smoke started to clear, Jago remained standing. The Corvan army was decimated. Only a handful that had been engaged with Iratian units remained standing. They quickly dropped their weapons.

Jago lowered his hand and struggled to catch his breath. Sweat furrowed his brow, and his arm was numb. *I did it*, Jago thought, *they have no hope of winning now*.

The Company ran to him, lifting him up on their shoulders. The Iratian soldiers started cheering, they did not think that they could've won. Many lives were lost in the battle from location A, over half of the soldiers, but they had won. They had seen the legendary power that Jago was capable of.

“Good job kid,” General Tomath complemented Jago through the comms, “you saved everyone here today.”

Jago grinned, exhausted. That last move had taken a lot out of him. He didn't mind the Company carrying him. He looked up at the night sky. He thought he saw something shining in the cloudy sky but decided it must have just been his imagination. He had won and no one from his company had died.

Lynn Forsigth hovered in the air over the battlefield. He kept his Leviathan, Bastion, in stealth mode. He did not want to be seen quite yet. He just wanted to see his power. The crater that Jago had left was massive. Smoke still rose from when he had fired the blue dragon. He grinned.

Jago's gotten quite a bit stronger since our last fight, Lynn thought, he may finally be worthy of fighting me. It's been over a year since our last fight, let's see what you can do Jago.

Lynn took off into the night sky, leaving Irati and Jago behind him. The time would soon come that they would fight again. He looked forward to it.

Chapter 7

*They invaded my home and
burned it to the ground.
My family was left
destitute, we nearly
starved.*

- Scen Yortall: Corvan Civilian

The morning came slowly. All of the officers were forced into meeting after meeting discussing how the Corvans had approached so suddenly. Jago was exhausted, he didn't get much sleep on a normal basis, and he had exhausted his body in the fight. General Tomath's words were becoming less and less cohesive. Jago's head slowly dropped down until all he could see was black...

Jago woke with a start. He was in his bed back at his place. The sun shone down brightly at him. *It's late*, he thought, *my windows face west, so it's early evening*. He jumped out of bed, he was fully clothed in his military uniform and was drenched in sweat. *The Hikari no Ryu Ken took more out of me than I thought it would, I don't remember how I got home*. He looked at himself through his mirror; he was a mess. *Good thing it's the weekend, I don't know how I'd feel about going to the base right now*. He dressed in a simple t-shirt and a pair of gym shorts, *I'd better get something to eat. Should've done that right as soon as the battle was finished*.

"Oh, you're awake?" Tyrn asked as he got into the kitchen. She had prepared what looked like a tuna salad, "That's good. I was getting worried."

"What are you doing here?!" Jago asked, startled.

Tyrn sighed, “You don’t remember how you came home this morning, do you?”

Jago struggled to clear his thoughts, he couldn’t remember any of that, “No, I don’t.”

Tyrn shrugged her shoulders, “Well, you were half asleep, so that’s understandable. You passed out before we even reached your place.” She leaned back on his counter and looked upwards recounting, “I carried you in here and dropped you on your bed. You’ve got to understand, I was exhausted myself from the night we had, let alone the battle. When I dropped you on your bed, you were already fast asleep. I was pretty worried, for all I knew, your technique could have dropped you into a coma. So, I decided to make sure that you were okay, and I spent the rest of the morning sleeping on your couch.”

“Oh, sorry about that, I’m supposed to eat whenever I use that, it takes a lot of energy.” He grabbed two plates from his cupboard, “Mind if I eat some?”

Tyrn gestured, “Go for it, it’s your food anyway.”

Jago dished out the food and they started to eat.

“You really don’t stock up a lot of food, do you?” Tyrn asked, “You’ve just got the essentials here.”

Jago shrugged, “I don’t eat much, and I don’t waste any money on junk food.”

“You said that you have to eat after you did that attack, why’s that?”

He sighed and put down his fork, “It takes up a lot of what you would call energy. It leaves my body exhausted. Only food and sleep can help me recover it.”

“What I would call energy?” Tyrn questioned, “What do you mean by that?”

Jago put his dish in the sink and walked into the living room, plopping down on his couch, “It’s kind of hard to explain.”

“Try me,” Tyrn smiled, “I’m interested.”

Jago thought for a moment, *I can’t reveal too much without breaking Master’s rules, but I suppose a brief explanation would be okay.*

He leaned forward, looking up at Tyrn, “What do you know of Ti?”

Tyrn looked puzzled, “Like the drink?”

Jago shook his head, “No, not tea, Ti. It’s an older concept, thousands of years old.”

Tyrn sat down next to Jago, “Then I’ve never heard of it.”

Jago knew that interest in Ti had been declining in the past few hundred years, but most people had at least heard of it, “What part of the country are you from?”

“I come from down south, in the Jorin Province, right by the mountains,” she replied.

Jago wracked his brains for a second, remembering the different names and locations of what Ti would be called, “I think then you should be familiar with the term Surakula then.”

“You mean the mystic force that penetrates through every living thing? It supposedly holds the universe together,” Tyrn answered confused, “Is Ti a form of Surakula?”

“No, Ti is in its essence Surakula, and it’s not a mystical force that

binds everything together,” Jago explained, “It’s actually the energy required to form and break atomic bonds.”

“What?” Tyrn asked bewildered.

“Let me explain. When atoms are split apart from uranium, what happens?”

“It creates a nuclear explosion,” she replied.

“And from that nuclear explosion, large amounts of energy is released. What the Mugen Shinzo Ken, what we do with Ti, is no more than what scientists do with uranium atoms. We manipulate the bonds to use energy for us.”

“But that doesn’t explain anything,” Tyrn protested, “It doesn’t explain how you can manipulate the bonds or why you get tired from using it.”

“I was getting to that. As for how we manipulate the energy, it is strictly forbidden for me from telling anyone. Only students of the Mugen Shinzo Ken are permitted to learn about it.” He glanced at her face and noticed her frustration, “However, I can tell you a little about the rules that binds what I can do. However, I need you to promise that you will never reveal what I’m about to tell you.”

“Okay, sure, that’s fine,” Tyrn replied quickly.

“I mean it. What I’m about to tell you includes my weaknesses. It’s a heavy burden to bear. If you get caught and tortured, you could give the enemy the key to being able to beat me. Are you sure you want to know?”

Tyrn nodded hesitantly, she was prepared, but she was surprised that Jago trusted her enough to tell her this. She was touched.

“Okay, there are four basic rules to controlling Ti,” he grabbed a pen off of his table and a notepad and started writing.

“Rule number one: Kō. The energy of a system remains the same before and after a reaction. If I was in a vacuum in space, I could not manipulate Ti in any way shape or form besides that which was in my body. This also means the energy required to use Ti is the same that is expended.

“Rule number two: Sōn. Perfect transference is impossible and energy is always lost to the surroundings. The amount lost is directly proportional to the skill of the user and the difficulty of the technique being used. The minimum amount that the loss can be is ten percent of the total energy used.

“Rule number three: Sen. The medium by which the transference is made must always be a being that can use Ti. This specifically refers to the user of the Ti. The loss of energy comes out of their personal energy supply, and whenever Ti is used, the Sōn or loss of energy must come from a being using Ti. Hence, why I can get tired by using it and why I need to eat food after using it.

“Rule number four: Ki. Ti naturally tries to achieve a state of most balance. This means that the more you manipulate Ti, the harder it gets, because it wants to stay the way it was. Because of this, using Ti from a distance is very complicated and difficult, and any Ti released as a projectile naturally disperses to the ground and the air the farther it moves away from you.”

Tyrn contemplated Jago’s explanation for a moment, looking at his writing to understand, “So that move you did yesterday, it must’ve had a high Ti loss.”

Jago nodded, “Yeah, had I stuck to just wrapping myself in Ti like I typically do, the loss would’ve only been around fifteen percent of my total energy. However, the Hikari no Ryu Ken had a loss of over eighty percent.”

“I don’t understand why you did it then,” Tyrn said puzzled, “You were doing just fine without resorting to it.”

Jago took a deep breath and looked up at his ceiling, pulling his arms behind his head, “You’re right, of course. It wouldn’t have taken much longer than using the Hikari no Ryu Ken either.”

“Then, why?”

Jago leaned forward, placing his hands on his knees, his hands clenched, his eyes downcast, “Jaled was right.”

Tyrn furrowed her brow, confused, “Right about what?”

He looked into her eyes, his own sunken and deflated, “Those men, they’re not what I... I didn’t mean to... It’s not like I wanted to...”

Tyrn’s eyes widened in understanding; Jaled had said no one could walk through killing so many men unscathed, and she could see that he was right. She had always thought Jago had been callous, unaffected by whatever he did, and maybe that was true before hand, but now? Jago had destroyed thousands of enemy units with his bare hands in just a few minutes. Tyrn understood well the terror that came with death, with killing, yet she had never had to be as close and personal as Jago had to be with his enemies. Killing with bare hands was on an entirely different level than killing with a rifle or a special technique.

Jago’s arms trembled, his heart frozen with fear, “When I looked back after what I had done... There were all of those bodies. If I had

continued like that... It was not supposed to be like that.”

Tyrn placed her hands on top of Jago’s, “So, rather than willing to experience that again, you took a risk to end it immediately.”

Jago nodded and pulled his hands away, tucking them under his arms, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to ramble on there. It didn’t use to bother me whenever I fought. I felt justified, I believed that we were fighting for the right cause. But yesterday, I thought about Lynn, my family, how I felt. And now I wonder, if I have not become exactly what I hated most. A monster with no regard to human life.”

He got up and walked over to his window that overlooked the city, “I’ve killed people, but killing people wasn’t... I wasn’t trying to... At the time, I couldn’t see any other way than to,” he sighed. He looked back at Tyrn, “I guess what I’m trying to say is that I never wanted to actually get caught up in the war besides Lynn.”

Tyrn sighed, “You know, you’ve been pretty hard to work with lately.”

Jago was stunned, “Excuse me?”

Tyrn shrugged, “It’s just that you’ve been all over the place recently.” She threw her hands up in the air, “It’s hard enough to help you without all of the crazy back and forth that you’ve been displaying recently.”

Jago looked towards the ground, more than a little flustered at her response to his plea, “Uh, sorry about that. There’s just been a lot going through my mind lately.”

“I understand,” Tyrn grinned, “Still, I enjoyed your explanation of Ti. It’ll help me recognize when you need help in battle.”

Jago shook his head, “Unless I’m facing Lynn, I won’t have a problem.”

A thought popped into Tyrn’s head, she was surprised she hadn’t thought of it earlier, “Does Lynn know how to use Ti?”

Jago nodded, “Yes, or some variant of it. When I fight him, there’s a difference between what I use and he does. I’m not sure what it is, but it most certainly involves Ti as well.”

Tyrn got up and stretched, “Well, don’t worry about it. I’ll be here to help when you need it.”

Jago’s melancholy broke and he smiled, “Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“I better get going, I haven’t fed Mark yet today,” Tyrn said gathering her things, “Can I get a ride? I had to fly here on your hovercycle.”

“Right, right,” Jago said, grabbing his keys, “Well, I don’t mind. Shall we get going?”

As they reached Tyrn’s place, Tyrn let out a large sigh, “Home. It feels like forever since I’ve been here.”

Jago chuckled, “Yeah, it’s been a crazy couple of days. So, I’ll see you Monday then?”

“Mhmm,” Tyrn responded, “Guess I’ll see you then.”

Jago waved goodbye, “Right, I’ll see you.”

Jago sighed as he shut his door. He never had a chance to talk to Tyrn about their date, especially what happened at the end of their date. *I guess we’ll talk about it Monday*, he thought as he got back onto his hovercycle, *No sense bringing it up now. Last night was just too crazy.*

As Jago got to his place he thought about the battle the night before. He couldn't wrap his head around it. *How did they break through? Is this a sign that Lynn is returning to the battlefield?*

He laid down on his couch thinking about what he had seen. *Whenever I face him, he taunts and derides me. I don't think he cares about his men. To him, this is all some kind of sick game, and I'm the only other player. Is that all we are to him, pieces moving on a board?*

He raised his hand to the ceiling with a swift punch, *I'll stop him, no matter what it takes.*

Chapter 8

*He just stood there, frozen
in shock, not even caring
that the world was ending
around him. I pleaded for
him to help us, but he just
turned and smiled.*

- Tysk Coval: Corvan Lieutenant

Sunday was typically dismal in Irati. It was a day of worship and mourning. Most people around the country gathered into churches, looking for both comfort from their fallen husbands, brothers, and sons, and also to lament against the war that had taken hold of the city. Not all believed, but it was a great comfort to many to find other people there, who knew their pain.

Jago was no different than a regular citizen, in fact he needed that sense of community even more so. Ever since Jarom's death, he had taken it upon himself to take Jarom's wife, Kathy, and Riza to church every week. He felt it was the least he could do since he blamed himself for Jarom's death. Although Riza constantly derided him and chastised him on whatever he did, she felt a great sense of respect and admiration for Jago.

Jago approached the Bloodthawne's door, dressed in his military regalia. It was custom for all soldiers to dress in their uniforms at church. Not only did it show a sign of respect to their fallen comrades, it showed that they were all the same, no one better than another. Every soldier understood that they could be the next to fall in battle. He gently rapped on the door.

Kathy opened the door, dressed in her Sunday best. She wore a knee length white dress, with a crimson flower pattern. She was a very beautiful woman, mature and elegant. Riza greatly resembled her mother and would undoubtedly look like her when she grew older. However, she lacked the finesse and maturation that her mother had. She looked no older than fifteen and carried herself like a young boy. She cared nothing for etiquette.

“Why Captain Kale, it’s good to see you this fine Sunday morning,” Kathy greeted, curtsying.

“It’s good to see you too, Mrs. Bloodthawne,” Jago bowed grinning, “You grow more beautiful everytime I see you.”

“Why Jago, thank you oh so very much,” she returned blushing.

“And how are you this morning, Riza?” Jago asked, “I trust that you are doing well.”

Riza folded her arms and harrumphed, “You really put a lot of stress on the Axial. I had to spend all day yesterday fixing it.”

Jago patted her on the head, “Thanks Shortstuff. I appreciate it.”

She stuck her tongue out at him.

“Now, now” Kathy berated, “We should get going. We don’t want to be late now.”

“Of course,” Jago said holding each woman in one hand, “Let’s go.”

It was just a few short blocks from where they lived, and it was a warm spring day. They passed by many people on the streets, walking to church as well. As they stepped inside, they each took a candle near the door and lit it from a candleabra. They walked down the aisle, placing their candles near the podium. On the floor next to it, small

tablets were splayed out, each carrying a name. Each represented a person who fell during battle, many of which who were from Atoli.

Jago searched through the names, and found one that he recognized, Glen Mado. His blood turned to ice, his throat choked up. He had known Glen well, they grew up in the same town. She was always a bold person, not afraid to voice her opinion, to stand up for what she believed in. Jago dropped to one knee, touching the tablet briefly. His eyes started to blur, and he quickly stood up hiding any sign of wetness in his eyes.

Riza looked towards Jago and could see the pain in his eyes. It was so intense that she could feel it in her heart. Empathy welled up in her heart. She reached her hand out to Jago, hesitating briefly. She placed it gently on his back, her own eyes welling up with tears. It reminded her of her father. Jago did nothing to remove her hand.

As they turned their backs to sit down, Jago noticed a few families were huddled together, crying. The chapel was packed with people. After paying their respects, they took their seats to the back. Jago sat in the corner, looking at the people in the crowd, his fists clenched tight. He couldn't bare to look anymore so he turned his head away, his arms trembling.

I could've saved them, he thought helplessly, I could have saved her. What good is all of this power if I can't protect the people around me? I understand why General Tomath held me back, why I had to wait to go out there, but still. His mind flashed to Lynn, smiling in the rain, holding a bloody carving knife. I feel so helpless. Every day, I see his face haunting me, smiling at me. I see the bodies of those who have died because of me, Mom, Dad, Ian, Jarom, Glen, and countless others. This is supposed to be a war, so why? Why does it feel like it's a personal

attack against me? Every person, every death, he's holding it over me.

Jago buried his face in his hands, feeling completely alone. The chatter, the cries of others, were all silent in his ears. All he could hear was the cries of pain that had come from his fallen comrades. All he could see was Jarom smiling at him as he pushed Jago away, his own stomach impaled with Lynn's fist. He remembered that all he could do was just run away, completely ignoring Jarom's cries of pain. His friend, his partner, his comrade in arms, last words shut out by the pounding of his heart. He didn't look back as the explosion wrapped around Jarom, pushing the rest of the Company away from him.

It wasn't until hours later that Jago returned to the battlefield. He saw the Axial, he saw his friend, unmoving and cold. There was hardly a body left, mostly just charred black remains. The Axial had been heavily damaged. Jago remembered the sun, shining brightly overhead, mocking him, not recognizing his pain, the storm that was in his heart. He sat for countless hours next to his corpse, crying and wailing. He had gathered what little was left of his friend, bringing him back to Atoli, unwilling to leave him there. He remembered the look on Kathy's face as he explained what had happened to her husband. He remembered her collapsing on the ground, completely breaking down. He remembered Riza disbelieving him, shouting at him, and then blaming him for what had happened as she too broke down next to her mother. Jago had never felt more alone than that day.

As he sat there in the chapel, reflecting on his failures, his mistakes, he felt a small hand touch his shoulder. He lifted his eyes to see Riza, whose own eyes were filled with tears, compassionately comforting him.

For the first time in her life, Riza truly saw Jago. Not as a brother or

a friend of her father's, but as a man. She saw the pain in his eyes, the burden he carried in his heart. She saw the weight of the world upon his shoulders, the fate of her nation, her life, crushing his. She didn't see the hero that everyone claimed him to be, but a young man, burdened with overwhelming sadness and grief. She always had a short temper and was always bickering with Jago, but now she felt true compassion.

She moved her arm to his other shoulder and held him tightly. He was different, he was no longer that cold, unfeeling mass that she had always worked with before. Something had changed in him, a brief light had awoken where there had been none. And yet, even more so than ever, she felt for him. Before, he could always ignore the pain, ignore the hurt, but now, he was drowning in sadness. And it crushed her to see him this sad, this burdened. She wanted to do anything to bring him out of despair, help him realize that she was there for him.

Jago lifted his head out of his hands, looking forwards. He gently turned his head towards Riza, "Thanks, Riza. I appreciate it."

She sat in silence, still holding him. Finally, after a few minutes, he sat back in his seat, breaking her embrace. Father Morh walked in, a short and stout man. He was a kind and gentle soul, the most kind and understanding person in the world. He had had a hard life growing up, and joined the church as a clergy man young. He looked briefly to the podium, to where the names were and placed his own candle down. He stared down the congregation on top of the podium, tears in his eyes.

"Brothers and Sisters," he said in a gentle raspy voice, "as many of you know, a battle was fought just a few days ago, right here near Atoli. And there are many more battles being fought right now, with the youth of this generation. Many of you have lost husbands, brothers, sons, daughters, sisters. Many of you have lost friends and comrades. I'd like

to take this moment to pray for those who are in battle and who are refugees of this war.”

His prayer was short, but the congregation held onto it, awed. As he finished, he looked at everyone, trying to catch them in the eye.

“I’d like to take the day to talk about those who are lost in a different way, whose hearts can’t take any more grief or pain. These are they who have lost hope in this world, seeing only bloodshed. I say unto you who could be one of these people, that all is not lost. There is still light at the end of the tunnel.”

Jago jerked his head towards the preacher, interested.

“It may seem that darkness is all that is left. It may seem that you are alone, that the enemy took everything from you leaving you to die. It may seem like life isn’t worth living anymore and all that remains is for you to embrace the icy darkness that is death. Perhaps you are hereto accept that as factm to leave here now and embrace death. But, I say unto you, live. Live your life like those who have fallen for you have, don’t take the easy way out. Don’t leave those around you who are suffering as well. I tell you this much, that despite what you might think, there are those around you who care about you.”

Jago’s eyes could not break Father Morh’s. He was at the edge of his seat. It was as if he was talking directly to him.

“Yes, those people around you who love you, even as our Lord above does. They need you as we need you.”

Jago’s mind flashed thoughts of Tyrn. She was always looking out for him, getting out of trouble. He knew, he knew that he cared for her, just as she cared for him. He didn’t recognize how deeply he felt about her, how sad she would be if he gave up. He remembered her words in

the Blind Eye Tavern, “Don’t you care what would happen to the people you care about if you were to die?! How I would feel?!” Her words hit him anew, as if he heard them truly for the first time. He had missed the inflection in her voice, her worry, her care. He remembered how she carried him back to his place, exhausted herself.

She’s always been there for me, Jago realized, *not just in battle, but for everything. We’ve been through so much together; I don’t think I’d be able to live without her.* His eyes opened wide, he realized it. She had loved him, with an unconditional love that superseded reason. He had treated her less than ideal. But he knew, he knew that for as much as she loved him, he knew he loved her just as much. It was more than just romantic attraction, she understood him like no one else could. Only she had seen what he had seen, had things taken that had been taken from him. He could feel it, a burning in his heart, a knowledge that they were more than just comrades. They were two kinds of the same soul.

His mind drifted away from the talk, thinking about his revelation. *She recognizes it too*, Jago thought as he leaned on his hands, *that more than anything we are inseparable. That’s why she’s always by my side, she knows.*

Riza studied Jago, ignoring Father Morh’s talk. She saw Jago’s deep concentration, his noticeable change from melancholy to reflection. He no longer bore those signs of sadness. Instead, she saw something new. She noticed that his mouth curved into a sincere smile, something she had never seen before. His aura radiated gratitude, which puzzled her. Had the words of Father Morh really affected him that much? She narrowed her eyes, trying to discern. *No*, she thought, *there’s something else, someone else.*

Her mind reflected on who that could be, immediately reaching the same conclusion Jago did. Tyra, a woman whose sorrows matched Jago's, a woman who had supported him, even when he was the cold and unfeeling soldier he was before. *His change, Riza deduced, it's because of her. Only she can get through to him.* She turned her head away from him, embarrassed.

I guess I'll always just be a kid in his eyes. Her heart fluttered, which she was annoyed with. *It's not like I've ever been in love with the guy, it's just that I'm jealous of her. Despite all of my efforts to help him, to move him, to feel something, it's not me who can do it.* She clenched her fists in irritation, *Instead, someone who's probably just as much of a train wreck as him can. Doesn't he have any sense? Sure they may be like each other, but it's not like she's the understanding type.* She cast her glance downward, *Who am I kidding? I ain't no angel either, but if that's what it takes to get him to act like a normal being, I'll try my best to help her along.*

She chuckled to herself, *All this time he thought he was trying to help Mom and myself with Dad's death, but the opposite couldn't have been more true. Mom recognized that Jago was broken inside, that Dad's death drove him over the edge. That's why she's never said anything about it to him. She recognized that Jago blamed himself and feeling more than a little guilty, has been trying to use me to cheer him up ever since.* She stared at her mother, *well Mom, it looks like your little plan failed. I always knew you were trying to set me up with him, but to me, he'll be nothing more than Jago.*

"She's a good woman," Riza whispered to Jago, "I'm glad that she's been looking out for you."

Jago's eyes shot to Riza's in surprise. She was more perceptive than

he thought. “What are you talking about?” he asked, hesitantly.

Riza smirked at him, “There’s no reason to hide it, Jago. Only she could be responsible for putting a smile on your face. It’s the first real one I’ve ever seen from you.”

Jago chuckled quietly, “Well, that’s true.” He relaxed a little in his seat. “You know, I never thought I’d ever truly smile ever again. Not after what happened.”

Riza’s mind flashed back to her father, misunderstanding what Jago meant. She didn’t know his past.

“Well, it’s been a rough go for everyone, this war has taken its toll.”

Jago nodded, “That it has. that it has.”

They turned their attention back to Father Morh’s talk and listened in silence to his words. Life didn’t seem so grim anymore, and he didn’t feel quite as helpless as he did before. Jago clenched his fists in determination, *The next time, I will beat him. But it won’t just be for me and not just for vengeance. I’ll be fighting for the little happiness I do have.*

Chapter 9

*I witnessed for myself, first
hand, what kind of monster
he was. It was like there
was a beast inside him,
tearing for control.*

- Jaled Stalls: Iratian Ensign

The next morning was busy for Jago. Instead of training like he normally was, he was stuck in meetings with his fellow captains for most of the morning. They had to go over every possibility on how the enemy slipped by them. Jago was getting impatient, he knew the answer, it just didn't satisfy Colonel Hughes.

"Listen Colonel," Jago said, running his hands through his hair, "Like I keep telling you, Lynn cloaked the entire army to come over at once."

"You keep saying that Jago, but you don't say how he could possibly manage to do something like that," Roy chided, "If you know of some technology that could do this, please fill us in."

Jago sighed, he couldn't go into the details of Ti with them. "Fine," he said, standing up, "I understand why you can't take my word for it. Instead, I'll show you an example."

He clapped his hands together, sparks flying out of them, a small crack splitting the sound in the room. He placed his hands on the desk, it started to vibrate violently. It then vanished under his hands. *This is going to cost me*, he thought as his hand was vibrating violently, *I have about a sixty percent Sōn loss on this technique. I have no idea how Lynn was able to hold this with several dropships.* The snapped back

into visibility. Jago sat down, breathing hard.

All of the captains were silent. Roy studied him, trying to discern what he had just done, “Tell me Jago. How did you do that?”

“I’m forbidden by oath to tell any about the secrets of the Mugen Shinzo Ken,” Jago replied, folding his arms, “Just know that I can’t prevent him from doing it.”

Roy slammed his hand down on Jago’s desk, “Cut the bull, Jago! We’re in a war! This is a great risk to the army!”

Jago did not break eye contact with the colonel, “You know that I’m forbidden from speaking about this.”

Roy grabbed him by the collar, lifting him off the ground, “Listen, punk. A lot of good friends of mine have been killed in the war. If you have some power that could turn the tide of this war, you’d better believe that I’d use it. Screw your oath!”

Jago clenched his fists and started gathering Ti around his body, “You’d better let go of my Colonel,” he said, his voice teetering with rage, “It’s not wise to threaten me.”

“HUGHES!” General Tomath shouted, “THAT’S ENOUGH!”

Roy’s hands started to tremble, grasping Jago. He broke his gaze and dropped him.

“Fine,” Roy pouted, “You want to see more friends die, by my guest.”

“Don’t let your personal interest in this cloud your judgement. We all know how much Glenn meant to you.”

Roy sat down angrily, shaking his head. *They don’t understand*, he

thought, *with that kind of power, Lynn would destroy us all in a few minutes. Jago's barely able to do anything about it, and they just expect me to be okay with this! It's not about Captain Mado, we were never more than friends. Lynn has us totally cornered.*

Jago straightened his coat, shooting a dirty glance at Colonel Hughes. "Lynn would never use this to win the war," Jago explained, "He's goading me into attack."

"What do you mean," Major Prida asked, "Why wouldn't they try this again?"

Jago shook his head, "You don't understand. None of you do. This isn't a war to Lynn, it's a game. His sole purpose is to fight me and kill me. Had he really wanted to do some damage, he would've used this technique on other battlefields. He knows that I'm stationed in Atoli, so he knew I'd stop him."

"What do you propose we do then, Captain?" General Tomath asked.

"We wait," Jago answered, "He's trying to lure me to take the bait. He's going to show himself shortly, and when he does, I'll be able to stop him."

Laura scoffed, which irked Jago. *Stupid woman*, he thought, *thinking she's so better than me.*

Don interjected, "We've had this conversation before Jago. You've yet proven to us that you **can** beat him. So far, you've proven nothing."

Jago stood again, "No, this time is different. I'll be able to stop him this time."

"I want to believe you Jago, honestly. Especially with that display of

power that you showed us,” Don said, letting out a big sigh, “But tell us. Have you gotten any stronger since the last time you faced him?”

“It’s not just about power!” Jago retorted, “And I have what it takes to beat him.”

“You may be right Jago,” General Tomath said, placing his hand on Jago’s shoulder, “We may have a way for you to defeat Lynn.”

Jago’s eyes opened wide in surprise, he was not expecting to hear that.

“The first prototype of the Alpha Gear has just been finished. I instructed Riza to install it into your Leviathan this morning.”

The Alpha Gear! Jago had completely forgotten about that. Riza said it was some sort of power booster.

“Are we sure we’re ready to test it?” Jin asked, “I mean, that’s a huge risk.”

Tomath looked back at Jin, “What choice do we have?”

The captains all nodded silently with the General. They desperately needed to push back the Corvans, they could not afford to hold back.

“We’re counting on you Jago,” General Tomath said, “If anyone can master this technology, it’s you. I’ve already sent you the instructions to you, they’re waiting in the bay. You should check it out and test it as much as possible before he challenges you again.”

“Right,” Jago exclaimed excitedly, “I won’t fail.”

He left the room in a hurry, anxious to get to the Leviathan bay. *This is it, he thought, a real chance at beating Lynn.* As he entered, he noticed Riza working on the Axial. He didn’t want to bother her during

the installation, so he headed to his workbench to where the Alpha Gear manual lay. He picked it up in excitement, ready to learn the secrets behind how to use it.

His excitement soon turned into incomprehension and confusion. It was all very complicated. Half of the manual contained the math and biology behind the device. He had no idea what it was talking about. And the things he did understand confused him. He put it down and started filling out the waivers included in the packet.

Jago sighed as he looked over the paperwork he was filling out. This Alpha Gear, as Riza called it, sounded intriguing, but the science behind it was boring. The vague warnings of the risks of using it didn't help either.

User may experience a reverse dilation of time, meaning that it will appear as if the world has slowed down. What the heck was that supposed to mean? Exhaustion, headache, and loss of consciousness may occur, followed by muscle atrophy. What the heck?! Jago thought, Is she trying to kill me?!

He looked up to see Riza working on the Axial, her hands and face covered in grease. *If she's wrong about this, it could be the death of me. But, Jago grinned, when have I ever been worried about the risks?*

He put down the packet on the workbench and approached Riza.

"Hey Shortstuff! I have a few questions about this Alpha Gear!" he shouted, trying to talk over the loud noises of welding.

Riza looked up at Jago and stopped welding, pulling up her goggles, "What do you want?!" she shouted grumpily, annoyed at being interrupted.

"I don't see anywhere in the packet on how I'm supposed to use it.

All it is, is how it works and how dangerous it is.”

“Good! You’re not supposed to know how to activate it, it’s very dangerous and I don’t want you to test run it until I make it more stable.”

Jago scoffed, “Then why explain all of this to me in the first place when it isn’t ready? General Tomath told me that you’d already had it prepared.”

“Don’t get short with me! It wasn’t my idea in the first place to install in now anyway. However, General Tomath said you should be notified on how it works right away, and he told me that it was your choice if you wanted to test it or not.”

“If that’s the case, why aren’t there any instructions on how to use it in the packet?”

Riza stared away from Jago, while scratching her nose and blushing, “I don’t think General Tomath knows what’s best in this situation.”

Jago grew very irritated, “HEY! That’s Insubordination! I could report you for that, you know!”

“The Axial is mine, Jago, not yours! If I decide that the Alpha Gear isn’t ready to test yet, then my word is law! The Axial already goes through enough crap as it is!” She threw her goggles back on and started welding again.

Jago threw his hands in the air and walked away, more than a little frustrated. She was impossible to talk to in that state. He walked back over to the workbench, looked at the paperwork, and walked out of the Leviathan Bay. *I don’t need this kind of stress right now*, he thought to himself as he walked down a corridor to the firing range.

As he got there, he noticed a group of soldiers hovering around Tyrn as she shot targets with her pistol 1000 meters away. The loud gunfire echoed through the room as each bullet found their mark. She was a crackshot, like always. She was so concentrated, so focused.

Jago leaned against the backwall, remembering how their date had been. *I didn't have a chance to talk to her about it, Jago thought, we were pulled right into a battle before we even had a chance to finish our date. But it's not only that, but I'd like to talk to her about what I realized yesterday.*

Jago stood there contemplating for a few minutes when Seth approached him.

"She's quite the shot, isn't she?" he asked Jago, smirking.

"The best in the Company," Jago replied, not really listening to him.

"And outside of it too, I'd wager."

Jago glanced over at Seth, a little irritated that he interrupted his thinking, "What do you want, Seth?" he sighed.

"Who says I want anything?" he replied slyly.

Jago rolled his eyes, there was always something he wanted, "I'm not a very patient man."

Seth rubbed both hands together, "Well, if you insist. You see, I've met this girl and I promised that I'd spend the day with her tomorrow-."

"And you told her that you had the day off," Jago finished for him.

Seth patted Jago on the back, "You said it! Not I! So boss, what do you say? Can I?"

Jago grinned, "You could," Seth smiled at this, "but then you have

the risk at meeting a senior officer while on duty.” Seth’s smile dropped, “I could get written up for unauthorized granting of soldier’s leave.”

“But we’re not going to do anything crazy!” Seth argued, “Heck, you could ask General Tomath for permission, if Laura won’t let you!”

“You know as well as I do that the General would never agree to that.”

Seth spluttered, “You could at least try!”

Jago considered it, “I could...,” he grinned again, “but how would I benefit from it? After all, I’m putting my neck on the line here.”

“I’ll do anything,” Seth stammered.

Jago raised his eyebrow, “Anything? Well, no matter. What I request is very small.”

“I’ll do it!” Seth replied, determined.

Jago grinned mischievously, “Okay. For the next month, I want you to obey my orders with exactness, no hesitation. If you can promise me that, I’ll see what I can do.”

Seth grimaced, “Every order?”

Jago nodded slowly, “Every order.”

Seth thought for a moment, this wasn’t about just following captain’s order. This would allow Jago to use him as a personal servant whenever he wanted.

“Fine,” he said, “I promise.”

Jago smiled, “Great! You most really like this girl.”

Seth shrugged, “My dignity is a small price to pay.”

Jago laughed, “You have no idea.”

Seth chuckled nervously. That laugh really disconcerted him, “What do you mean?”

“I guess you’ll just have to wait and see.”

Seth slowly backed away from Jago and walked out of the room. Jago’s smile dropped as he left. *It’s about time he learned how to follow orders anyway*, Jago thought, turning his eyes back to Tyrn. She was still shooting rounds. As she finished up, she turned her back to see Jago. Ignoring the others around her, clamoring to see her target sheet, she approached him.

“Excellent shooting as always, Lieutenant,” Jago said, nodding to her target sheet.

Tyrn shrugged, “No better than what I usually do.”

Jago grinned, “Which is still better than the best of what all the rest of us can do.”

They walked into the hallway together, ignoring the others who were still impressed by Tyrn.

“How’d your meetings go?” Tyrn asked, “Did they decide on anything?”

Jago sighed, “Well between Colonel Hughes not listening to me like usual and Major Prida deriding me, they’ve finally agreed to let me onto the battlefield when Lynn arrives.”

“What?” Tyrn said worried, “What about Lieutenant Colonel Gioke’s opinion?” She knew what Don thought of Jago going onto the

battlefield. To him, it was equivalent to surrendering.

Jago placed his hands behind his head, “Well, General Tomath stopped him from saying much. They’ve decided they’re going to use me to test the Alpha Gear when the time comes.”

“What’s that?” Tyrn asked, curious.

He glanced sideways at her, “It’s some sort of device that’s supposed to augment our reflex abilities. Riza’s spearheading it with the rest of the developers. She was supposed to have it installed this morning for me to test, but you know how stubborn she can be.”

Tyrn stopped, surprising Jago. “Do you really think it could mean that big of a difference.”

“It could,” Jago responded, “but it’s untested. I’ll have to risk my life using it.”

“Which isn’t that different from what we normally do anyway. Is the risk high?”

Jago shook his head, “No one knows. But even it is, it would be worth it.” He turned to her, his eyes full of determination, “All of these years Lynn has been out of my hands, out of my reach. Now that there could be a way for me to finally get to him, to stop him, I’d be more than willing to take that risk.”

Tyrn regarded Jago, sadness filling her soul, “You’d be willing to throw everything away? You don’t care whether you live or die so long as you beat him? Do you really hate him so much?”

Jago placed his hand on her shoulder, “It’s not about hating him anymore. Though, that does still play a factor. No, I realized, there’s more to life than just my past. I have a future worth protecting as well.”

Tyrn stood in silence for a moment, slowly realizing what Jago had said.

Jago smirked, “I’d rather not throw my life away. But I have a chance to finally end this, to live a normal life. You better believe that I’m going to take that chance.” He grabbed her hands.

“I never had a chance to talk to you about Friday night, we were pulled into battle before we had a chance,” Jago stammered, unsure of what to say. “I’ve come to realize, that despite all I have done, and no matter how hard I pushed away, that you’ve always been there for me. You’ve had my back more times than I can count.”

Tyrn’s breath quickened, her heart racing. She couldn’t bear to look Jago in the eye. Her face started to blush.

“When I became your commanding officer, your partner, I was stuck in abyss of darkness and despair. I didn’t care whether I lived or died. I only had hate in my heart. I was no different than a monster. You’re the reason I was able to wake up from that nightmare, to finally see some light.”

He held her hands tightly, his voice unwavering, “It seems like all of this, this war, Lynn, could be over in just a few days. I realized that I need you in my life, not just as a partner or as a friend. But rather, someone I could be with and spend my life with.”

He dropped his gaze, “So that’s why. That’s why I’m willing to take this risk. To end this once and for all. And to make something out of our lives.”

Tyrn was stunned. She didn’t know what to say. She yearned to say something, anything. She wanted to tell Jago how she felt, how much he meant to her. But she couldn’t. All she could do was hold his hands

tightly, in silence.

After a minute of silence, she found the strength to speak, “When all of this is over, we can talk more about this. I’m just worried, Jago. I’m worried that in your pursuit for something greater, you’ll be killed. I’ve seen it time and time again. You ignore your own safety, and whenever Lynn comes into the battle...”

Tears started to stream down her eyes, “You change. You no longer can think rationally about things. And I know, I know, that once you see him again, all of this, our conversations, how you feel, it will change...”

She dropped her hands from his. Jago was shocked into silence. It was hard to hear this from her; he knew she was right. Whenever Lynn was brought up, he barely could hold his emotions in check, let alone if he actually faced him.

“You’ll throw everything away, chasing him. I don’t want to see yourself get killed. But if you jump in now, at the first chance you have of true success, I’m afraid that that’s going to be what’ll happen.”

Someone ran down the hall towards them, it was Ilel.

“Captain Kale, he’s back! Lynn Forsigth has been spotted at the front lines in the Draumont Wastelands,” he said, trying to catch his breath.

Jago looked at Ilel in surprise. *It’s too soon*, he thought. He clenched his fists tight. *No, I have to beat him now, I might never have the chance again.* He turned away from Tyrr to go to the Leviathan Bay. He was stopped by Tyrr, who was holding onto his back. She leaned her head against his back.

“Can you tell me that you’re completely calm, that you have

everything under control?" she asked, quietly and dejectedly.

Jago hesitated, his blood was boiling. Memories of his family flared into his mind. More than anything, he wanted to leave to go fight Lynn, to finally end it. But he couldn't move his legs. He thought about what Tyrn had said. He turned to face her.

He smiled, "No, I can't." He grabbed her by the hands again, "But that doesn't matter. Because I won't face him until I'm prepared."

Tyrn looked up at Jago, wonder in her eyes. His eyes were lighter than before, not cold or unfeeling.

"If everyone keeps telling me that I shouldn't go," Jago said, "then they're right. I'm going to test the Axial first."

He let go of her hands again, stepping away.

"Jago," she called out.

He turned.

"You can beat him Jago," she declared, "I believe in you."

Jago smiled, "Not without you, I can't. Come with me, I'll need your help."

Lynn surveyed the battlefield. He had no direct involvement in the fight going on. He left that to his officers. Even so, the Irati did poorly against his soldiers. It had been days since he began his assault on the front lines. He paced back in forth in frustration, *is he not coming? Have I scared him away?* He thought of Jago, a man who he once called a friend, a man who hated him more than anything else in the world. *My father told me he'd be here right away, that we had destroyed any*

rational thought that he has, so why? Why does he stay away?

He looked at the battle, fire erupting everywhere, screams piercing the skies. *It has been too long since I've had a fight, a fight worthy of being a challenge. Does he not yearn to kill me? Did I not push him over the edge?*

He hovered over the battlefield, stretching out his arm. *If he will not come willingly, his arm started glow black and emerald green, then I will make him come.*

The field erupted in a giant explosion, obliterating the Iratian soldiers. *How long will you keep away when I decimate your army, Jago?*

The training was going very well for Tyrn and Jago. Jago had mastered the basics of the Alpha Gear, which was constantly active in his systems. He was remarkably more powerful than before. He could feel his body brimming with power. He had made the right call by staying away. Now he was sure that he could beat Lynn.

Laura Prida scoffed on the sidelines. Thousands were being massacred each day, and their best weapon was doing nothing to stop it. She had listened to Don's explanation that this was necessary, but couldn't wait anymore.

"Captain Kale!" she shouted, "The time has come for you to join the battle! We can't afford to lose any more men. Are you ready?"

Jago smiled through the Axial. Tyrn looked at him in awe. He nodded, "We're finally ready. Let's go stop this war."

Chapter 10

*He moved with such speed,
such fury. I never imagined
what he truly was capable
of.*

- Tyrn Ridner: Iratian Lieutenant

Jago surveyed the desolate wasteland that was the battlefield, seeing all of the death and sorrow due to the futile struggle of war. He looked for the one who ruined his life, the one that took everything away from him. There were reports that he was there. General Lynn Forsigh had finally made a return to the battlefield after a year of absence.

Leviathans flew around trying to destroy each other, the green and blue of the Corvan military against the crimson and white of the Irati Empire. It was like watching a dance, bright explosions lighting up the night sky. Only low grade Leviathans fought each other down below the gorge he was standing on, there weren't any high ranking officers to be seen.

He's waiting for us to join the fight, Jago thought as he noticed the roughly even match between the two armies. The Axial searched through the battles with its sensor for biological signatures, trying to find the traitor. The Company stood behind Jago, each in their high grade Leviathans, waiting for orders. He had kept the rest of his company out of it. They were not needed here, not today.

Tyrn approached Jago in her Leviathan, the Royal, and asked, "Sir, what are your orders?"

Jago regarded her for a second and then continued to survey the

wasteland, “Hold back for now,” He narrowed his eyes, “He’s waiting for us to make the first move.”

The battle continued to rage on before them, machine parts and bodies strewn all over the wasteland. It became apparent after a few minutes that the Corvan military had the upper hand. It wasn’t that their weapons were superior; rather all of their pilots were more skillful than the Irati’s.

This is what happens when men are drafted into war, Jago thought; People who have no desire to fight will lack the motivation to fight the necessary battle.

The Iratian soldiers were being routed to a cliff’s edge as the advancing Corvan soldiers began to eradicate them.

Jago scowled, *they’re better than I thought. If I don’t interfere now, we’re going to lose.* Jago raised his hand, “Alright soldiers, it seems the Corvan officers have decided to hide like the cowards they are. Let’s show our compatriots what true warriors are like. Company, Charge!”

A battle cry shook the earth as the Company jettisoned off to save their comrades. The obvious difference in skill was such that the Corvan soldiers stood no chance against the Company. They flipped and twisted in midair while raining bullets and grenades on the helpless soldiers before them.

Seth flew forward in his Obelisk Leviathan, releasing mortars that caused a chain reaction of explosions that wiped out a tenth of the Corvan military. The air was singed with gunpowder.

“This is my kind of battle!” he yelled as he fired more rounds.

“These guys are just pushovers!”

He continued to fire more and more rounds from his arm cannon. Despite the Corvan’s desperation to take him down, he stood, deflecting all of their bullets. None could pierce through his armor. He let loose a plethora of grenades that wiped away the soldiers close to him. He fought through smoke and flying debris, not hesitating to destroy anything that was blue or green.

Shado, in her Nightmare Leviathan, carved a path of destruction with her double phase swords. It was as if she was dancing. She cut through the Corvan soldiers like tissue paper. Her blood red and white Leviathan appeared like a monster, marking certain death wherever she struck. She had earned the nickname Death Edge, due to those twin blades.

Ben moved deftly into the enemy ranks in the Eagle Leviathan, skillfully dodging and countering any enemy attacks. He carried no weapons on him. He moved into his enemies’ attacks, never striking them. As he moved like a leaf through them, they ended up shooting or cutting each other. When one tried to throw a grenade at him, he kicked it back at them. The Walking Warrior would not be taken by any attack. He had the record for never being wounded in battle. His calm demeanor never broke into excitement or worry; he was always calm and tranquil and repeated his mantra.

“Though the sparrow or hawk may fall prey to the wind, the Eagle will soar.”

The rest of the Company formed their classic circle, mowing down the enemy Leviathans. Jaled headed the circle, issuing brief commands

to the others.

The Iratian soldiers cheered on these heroes as they obliterated the Corvan military. These were the legends that they heard of. Each one of the twelve making short work of the enemies before them.

Jago remained atop the gorge he was on, continuing to search the edges of the battlefield for any sign of Lynn. Tyrn remained atop the gorge with him, determined to follow where he went. She knew, as well as he did, that it was only a matter of time before the elite Corvan officers showed themselves.

They didn't have to wait long as several Corvan Leviathans made their way to the battlefield from the far edges of the wasteland. Jago's heart swelled with rage as his Leviathan scoped in on the leader of the five approaching units. The leading one was ebony black, with a horn on its head, and green flame emanating from the rockets.

He clenched his fist in rage, "That's him! The Bastion Leviathan! I would recognize that demon anywhere." His mind turned off any other thought besides Lynn, and he rocketed off towards Lynn.

"WAIT! JAGO! THERE'S TOO MANY OF THEM FOR YOU TO HANDLE ALONE!!" Tyrn shouted as she followed Jago.

"No, I've got this handled! If you want to help me, go ahead, but Lynn is mine alone!"

As the Bastion and the Axial flew towards each other, time itself seemed to stop. Each breath was calculated, each movement meaningful, the ongoing battle below seemed like child's play to them. The two were moving at such speeds that it seemed they were

teleporting.

“LYNN!!!!!!!!!!” Jago screamed as they approached each other.

“JAGO!!!!!!!!!!” Lynn shouted back as they finally collided in midair with an earth shattering punch.

The pressure from their mid air collision pushed the air away from them and ignited. Fire swirled around the two Leviathans. They furiously struck at each other with punches and kicks. They moved across the battlefield, destroying whatever cliffs were in their way. No one could even get close to them, as they were pushed back from their blows.

“MY MOTHER, MY BROTHER, AND MY FATHER!!!!!! I’LL NEVER FORGIVE YOU FOR WHAT YOU DID TO THEM!!!!” Jago yelled as he struck out with a punch like lightning.

Lynn caught it and laughed, “Is that all you’ve got Jago? You disappoint me.”

Jago was caught by surprise, he was moving much faster than he was in previous battles, “WHAT?!!”

“THIS IS TRUE POWER!!!” Lynn shouted as he punched Jago with a flaming green fist. Jago was knocked across the battlefield, his rockets disengaging for a moment. Jago recovered by jumping from the side of a nearby cliff and rocketing back towards Lynn. Lynn, however, was prepared for Jago and struck him with a lariat. Jago crashed into the earth, creating a small crater. All of his body ached.

“Jago!” Tyrrn shouted in concern, trying on her own to combat a

Corvan Lieutenant.

“The mind of the warrior should stay focused on the foe that they are fighting!” the Corvan Lieutenant shouted as he shot Tyrn with his powerful rifle.

It grazed her shoulder as she skillfully dodged it, returning with a rifle shot of her own, hitting the lieutenant square in the chest. His Leviathan erupted in flames, the impact of the bullet causing an ear rupturing explosion. His remains crashed into the wasteland below. Tyrn flew over to where Jago had crashed ignoring the other Corvan officers as they tried to strike her. Two more officers flew in to stop her, one armed to the teeth in various assault rifles and machine guns, the other wielding only a phase sword.

“Where do you think you’re going, girl!?” one shouted at her as he swung his sword at her. It narrowly missed, buzzing quietly above her head. The other bombarded her with heavy fire, completely encasing her left side with hundreds of bullets. The Royal Leviathan was well armored so they didn’t pierce through, but it was wearing down on the heavy shielding.

I’ve got to get out of this mess! Tyrn thought as she released a flash grenade on herself. Although she herself could not see, she rocketed upwards, away from the two officers. They, however, followed her skyward, protected by their Leviathans.

“Do you think you’d get rid of us that easily?!” the heavy armed one shouted as he fired more bullets at her.

Tyrn swooped down in the Royal Leviathan, pulling out two EMP grenades, “No, but these should do nicely.” The grenades fell towards

the two Leviathans, erupting before the two officers had time to react. The powerful electrical shock shut down their systems, where they screamed down to the earth below.

Down below, Jago had gotten up to face the approaching Lynn. His breathing was heavy and ragged, his arms shaking, his legs trembling. His eyes; however, were unchanged. They raged with a flaming hot fury and determination to destroy the monster in front of him.

Lynn scoffed, “You thought you could kill me with that power?” He jumped forward and punched the Axial sending it ten meters backwards. Jago screamed in pain. *How*, Jago thought, *how is he this strong?*

“You are weak!” Lynn taunted as he approached the axial. “As you are now, you won’t beat me even if you had 100 years!”

Jago staggered as he got up, trembling with rage, “I’m the weak one?!” he contended, “You’re the coward who betrayed his friends!”

Jago’s body grew stronger with his resolve, “And for what?! A country that you don’t even know anything about! A father who couldn’t care less about you!”

Lynn grew angry and hit Jago across the face, “SHUT YOUR MOUTH! You have no idea what you’re talking about! You’re just a child in a game of kings!”

“That may be so, but I’d never hurt my friends or family like you would, LYNN!!!!” Jago shouted as he struck Lynn in the face with all of his might, sending him flying.

Lynn was utterly shocked. *Where did all of that power come from?!*

he wondered.

Jago didn't hesitate in following Lynn pulling back his right hand readying for attack.

"This hand of mine ROARS with the dragon inside!!!" Jago yelled as his hand started to glow bright blue. "It thirsts for VENGEANCE!!!!"

Lynn stopped in the middle of the air, "I won't let you!" he shouted, his hand burning green.

Jago shot up to where Lynn was, his hand burning blue.

"HIKARI NO RYU KEN!!!!!!" Jago shouted as he thrust his hand at Lynn, a burning blue dragon surrounding his hand.

"YAMI NO TORA KEN!!!!!!" Lynn responded as his right hand was enveloped in an emerald tiger.

As their fists collided, the entire battlefield shook with power. Lightning flowed out of both of their hands to the surrounding ground around them. The earth around them was pushed back from the shear pressure created from their impact. The sky darkened and the air grew heavy. Yet they still pushed their fists against each other, both trying to gain the upper-hand, both screaming for victory.

The rest of the battle had stopped to see these two behemoths fight each other. All eyes were fixed on them, the blue and white dragon from Jago, and the emerald and black tiger from Lynn, neither seemed to give way to each other. Their screams pierced the heavens themselves.

“RAHHH!!!!!!” Jago screamed, “I WILL DEFEAT YOU!!!!!!”

Lynn grunted as Jago started to push him back.

“NO, JAGO!!!!!!” Lynn shouted as he pushed back, “IT IS I WHO WILL CLAIM THIS VICTORY!!!!!!”

The tiger pushed forward, and the dragon had to retreat. Lynn started pushing Jago back, “YOU DON’T KNOW POWER AS I DO!!!” he shouted.

Jago’s arm was burning, it was all he could do to hold on; he couldn’t even push back. *NO!* he thought, *I can’t lose here! Everyone, Tyrr, General Tomath, They are all depending on me!* Jago’s legs started to give way to exhaustion, and he was forced to the ground by Lynn.

“NOW GIVE UP AND ACCEPT YOUR FATE!!!” Lynn shouted as he pushed his hand forward again, the emerald and ebony tiger increasing in size.

What can I do? It’s all I can do just to hold my hand up! Jago thought furiously, *At this rate, I’m going to lose!*

The emerald tiger engulfed Jago in its flames as Jago’s arm gave out. He screamed in unimaginable pain. The battlefield was covered in green smoke. All looked on in wonder at Lynn, who stood with his hand outstretched. No taunt or praises of victory came from him, only silence.

As the smoke cleared, Jago lay burned on the ground. The Axial was still completely intact, covered in burns and ash. However, Jago could not move, despite the Axial’s conditions. Lynn was surprised that

he wasn't obliterated.

He's stronger than I thought, he thought as he walked towards Jago slowly.

He grabbed the Axial and lifted it into the air.

Lynn laughed maliciously as he held Jago up, "You're finished, Jago!" He held up his fist, shrouded in an emerald flame.

Jago's breathing was heavy and pained. He couldn't move his body. He had several broken ribs and was littered with bruises. He struggled to hold onto consciousness. *Is this it? Am I going to die here? My body is spent, I can't move. I can feel my mind slipping. Tyrn can't save me this time.*

"Say hello to your family for me!!" Lynn taunted.

Jago's thoughts turned to that night, where the lifeless faces of his family stared at him with cold, dead eyes, drenched in blood. Jago's body started to shake with anger as he recalled the smiling face of Lynn's in that black and stormy night.

"NO!!!!!" Jago shouted as he pushed Lynn's burning fist into his face.

Lynn screamed in pain and dropped Jago, covering his face with his hands.

"I WON'T LET IT END HERE!!!!" Jago yelled. His body was trembling as power coursed through him. The crimson and white flaps on the back of the Leviathan started to move from their downwards facing position to form eight rays in a circle. They pulled slightly out as

light started to get pulled into the back of the Axial, and the Axial started to glow all over in crimson light.

“MY FUTURE!!! MY FUTURE BURNS BRIGHT!!!” He shouted as the ground cracked around him. The Axial started to vibrate violently, and the air grew heavy around Jago.

“Alpha Gear activated,” the Axial computer said in a clear voice.

Time seemed to inch to a crawl and Jago could see the exact details of everything around him. Every movement was slow in his eyes; the insects around him seemed to be still in mid-air, and he could feel everything around him.

“What’s going on?” he questioned.

Tyrn watched in amazement at the glowing Axial and the amazing powerful emanating from it, “Was he able to activate the Alpha Gear?” she wondered.

“WHAT IS THIS POWER???!!!!!!” Lynn demanded.

Jago understood, this is what Riza had told him about! The Alpha Gear which she so desperately tried to persuade him not to use had been activated successfully; he could feel the power coursing through his body. He hadn’t tapped into its true capabilities beforehand. This was its true power. He had truly become as a Leviathan, unbreakable. He pointed at Lynn, his fury overflowing.

“This is the Dragon that you created! Now hear, HEAR ITS LOUD ROAR!!!!!!!”

He brought his hand back and his hand started to burn bright blue.

The wind blew furiously around him, sparks started to shoot off his hand into the air and into the ground. Debris from the battlefield started to lift up off the ground.

“NOW TREMBLE!!!!!!! TREMBLE AS YOU TASTE THE FURY OF THE CRIMSON BEHEMOTH!!!!!!!” Jago shouted.

A bright blue pillar of fire surrounded the Axial, shooting both fire and powerful sparks at everything around it. It made a thunderous noise, like unto a flowing waterfall.

“I’LL STOP YOU!!!!!” Lynn exclaimed as he sent a beam of emerald flames out of his hands at Jago. It encased the blue pillar of fire, creating green smoke around the Axial. It dissipated and the Axial remained standing, the bright pillar still surrounding him.

“GO!!!!!!!!!!!!” Jago roared and the pillar of fire surrounded Lynn, forcing him to remain still.

I can’t move! Lynn thought as Jago rocketed towards him.

“MUGEN RAI RYU KEN!!!!!!!!!” Jago screamed as he struck out his hand towards Lynn.

“NO!!!!” Lynn shouted as Jago’s fist made contact.

An explosion of lightning and fire consumed everything in front of Jago. The Corvan military watched in horror as the landscape upheaved itself and disintegrated. The giant blue explosion transformed the shape of the wasteland.

Smoke surrounded the area and the energy Jago was holding in collapsed. He dropped to one knee, his hand still raised. The pain of his

injuries returned to him, and he was exhausted.

“I did it!” Jago exclaimed weakly as he looked heavenwards.

“NO!!! It is I who have won!!!”

Jago looked up and to his horror, Lynn remained standing. The Bastion was in disarray; Lynn’s bright flame-like hair peeked through his broken helmet. His left arm was limp, and the Bastion started to shoot off sparks from exposed wires.

“NOW DIE, JAGO!!!!” Lynn shouted, fury in his voice.

He raised his right hand, consuming it with those emerald flames. He walked slowly to where Jago was. Suddenly, he was struck by a powerful rifle shot.

“Ergh!” he grunted as he staggered backwards, his flames dissipating.

He looked up to where he was struck, and to his surprise, Tynr descended down with her rifle pointed straight towards Lynn. She fired again, hitting him in the left shoulder.

“Stay away from him!” she shouted as she fired again, this time hitting him in his left leg.

Lynn staggered to his knees, in immense pain. He regarded the situation. He was exhausted and his injuries numerous. He didn’t have the strength to take on another Leviathan, even if it was one such as Tynr’s.

“You may have won the battle, but I will win the war!” he shouted

as he rocketed backwards, away from his enemies.

Tyrn stayed her rifle. The enemy was retreating. Jago stared in awe at Tyrn. She had saved his life again! She was much more reliable than he originally thought when he first met her, all those years ago.

Lynn reached the top of a cliff and shouted, “SOLDIERS, FALL BACK!” More than happy to oblige, the Corvan soldiers started to flee. Some were shot down by the Iratians. The remaining officer quickly fled to Lynn, and they took off.

“NO!!!! YOU’LL PAY!! YOU’LL PAY FOR WHAT YOU DID TO MY FAMILY!!!! LYNN!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” Jago yelled in rage as Lynn vanished beyond the horizon.

“DARN IT!!!!” Jago exclaimed as he slammed his fists into the ground, “I failed again! Even with all of that power, I still wasn’t strong enough!”

Tyrn wrapped her arms around Jago, sympathy in her eyes, “It’s okay, Jago. We won, we’ll beat him another day. There are more battles to be fought yet.”

Jago wept in agony. How long, how long would it take until his family rested in peace?

The Irati Army gathered around him, shouting praises of victory. They all commended Jago on how amazing his battle was. Only Tyrn saw the sorrow in his eyes, how much it pained him that Lynn lived yet. Jago sat there, silently weeping, his face hidden from everyone by his helmet.

In the end, 135 Irati soldiers had died, none from the company. The

decisive battle of the Draumont Wastelands was over, the Empire had won. The war had now shifted in their favor, and everyone was talking about the hero of the Irati Empire, Jago Kale, and how he had activated the Alpha Gear and pushed back the unstoppable Corvan military.

Chapter 11

*I was a fool to be so
overconfident. He was
stronger than my wildest
expectations. I, alone,
never stood a chance
against him.*

- Jago Kale: Iratian Captain

There was a grand ceremony held in Jago's honor. The emperor, Torashi Yokubo, a young man of twenty years, bestowed upon him the nation's greatest medal, the crimson eagle. Jago had never felt so undeserving of praise in his life.

The army had pushed forward from Jago's "victory", conquering much of the Corvan lands. Lynn hadn't been seen since the battle. According to rumors, he was injured and unable to fight. Jago scoffed when he heard those. He knew the truth.

His mind kept replaying the battle over and over in his mind. The explosion, Lynn declaring victory, a few seconds short of killing him. If it hadn't been for Tyrn, then they would have lost. Jago threw all he had into that attack, and it barely damaged him. He knew that the gap between the two of them was large, but he didn't realize how large the gap had been. Before, he'd always imagined it like a river, that it was possible to cross it, but now he knew the truth. Between Lynn and him stood an ocean, as wide as one could ever be. And he felt like he was drowning in it.

He could hardly eat, he couldn't sleep, all he could think of was Lynn's face taunting him with victory. Tyrn had tried to console him,

but her words were silent to his ears. He had always hoped that the barrier between the two of them was crossable, but it wasn't. Lynn would always be stronger than him.

Jago turned to face the crowd, the cheers of the audience deaf on his ears. They didn't know what a failure their hero had been.

In the following weeks, all meetings he went to, all training, it all seemed pointless to him. Don had been right, there was no way that he could ever beat Lynn. Training was pointless. His hatred was burning out quickly, to be replaced solely with despair.

Tyrn hated to see Jago so dejected. She thought it was heartbreaking to watch Jago beforehand, a man filled with so much hatred, but that did not compare to the version of Jago that looked at her now. All words of future and togetherness had ceased. His eyes were darker than ever before now, almost a listless emptiness about them. He had pushed her away again.

For the first time since Jago's parents death, Jago started to dream again. No longer did he watch his parents die every night, but instead his nights were filled with nightmares.

He stood in a desolate wasteland, surrounded by the people who had died around him. Jarom, his parents, Ian, and all of the others, their eyes stared lifelessly at him. They reached out for him, their bodies twisted and broken.

Jago couldn't run away. All he could do was watch as they clung to his body, their screams piercing his body.

Lynn stood afar ways off, that gentle and kind smile frozen in his face. He held someone in his arms. It was Tyrn. Her body was broken, like the others. No cries came from her. Her lifeless eyes haunted his.

Her eyes screamed out to him, asking, “Why couldn’t you save me?”

He tried to respond, but he was frozen in place. It started to rain down on him, in a torrent. The wasteland started to flood, dragging his body under the black and icy water.

Jago woke with a start in his bed. He looked at his clock, it was 2:30. He was drenched in sweat. He sat up and was still for a few minutes.

It’s over, he thought, all of my hopes, my dreams. There’s no winning this war. He stared into his open palm, there’s no beating him. He wrapped his hands around his legs, terrified. I’ve always believed that I could do it, but I was wrong. We can only wait until he destroys us.

He sat still until his exhaustion dropped him to sleep again. All he could see was black all around him as far as the eye could see. He stumbled around in the dark, unsure of what he was looking for.

“Is that it?” a voice asked, piercing the darkness, “are you going to turn your tail and run away?”

Jago recognized the voice immediately, “Master?”

Jago could see his master in front of him. His back was turned to him. All he could see was his gilded crimson cloak. He ran towards him, never getting a step closer.

“Didn’t I teach you that there would always be stronger opponents out there?” Roken Jiryuku asked, his voice deep and dark. “That no matter how hard you tried, there’d always be stronger?”

“Master, it is you,” Jago said, relieved, “But it’s pointless Master, he’s too strong.”

“Since when did strength have to do with battle?!” Roken

demanded, “Did I teach you nothing?!”

“But Master,” Jago said, his voice pained, “I can’t beat him. I’ve tried all of your teachings!”

Roken’s body started to distance himself from Jago’s, “I thought I trained you better than that.”

He was almost out of view, “Wait, Master. Come Back! I need your help.”

Roken scoffed, “I guess you were just a worthless apprentice all along.”

Jago dropped to the ground, his body trembling, “Please, Master.”

Roken stopped, “I told you, didn’t I? Since it would be an embarrassment to my name if you stayed the worthless pupil that you are, come find me again. Or have you forgotten the promise that we made all of those years ago?”

Jago woke up, his arms and legs stiff. He had fallen his sleep with his body curled, sitting up. His mind was more alert than it had been in weeks. He remembered what his master had told him.

“Jago, you must start your Warrior’s Journey from here to find your own place in the world,” Roken had said, “It has been an honor to have taught you.” He bowed to Jago.

“Thank you Master,” Jago had replied, bowing back, “I will carry your teachings always, wherever I go.”

“Remember, when you have finished your journey, come and see me again. Then I will teach you the final secrets of the Mugen Shinzo Ken. Only then, will you have true mastery over Ti.”

Jago felt a chill run through his body. His training wasn't finished yet. He still had a slimmer of hope. His body woke from despair, his feelings returned. His eyes grew more and more determined. *There's still a chance left*, he thought as he sat there. Only his Master could help him now.

Chapter 12

*He had changed. He was
no longer the scared little
boy that he had been. Now
he was a man.*

- Roken Jiryuku: The Only True Master of the Mugen Shinzo Ken

When Tyrn saw Jago again, she was surprised. His presence was different. He was no longer in despair. All she could see in his eyes was determination. He ran to her.

“Tyrn!” he shouted, passing others in the training, “I figured it out!”

“What do you mean?” she asked, puzzled.

He lifted her off the ground and spun her around. Tyrn blushed furiously, embarrassed.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He put her down in clenched his fist in front of her, “I figured out how to beat Lynn.”

Tyrn raised her eyebrows in surprise, “Really? You told me yesterday that no amount of training would ever close the gap between the two of you.”

Jago nodded, “That’s before I realized it.”

“Realized what?”

“I’m still a novice. I’m not a master yet,” he explained.

“What are you talking about?” she demanded.

“The Mugen Shinzo Ken. I still haven’t mastered it yet.”

“And this is a good thing,” she said, confused.

“Yes!” He said grabbing her shoulders, “Don’t you see? I can still beat him.”

“How?”

“I’m going to finish my training and learn the final secrets of the Mugen Shinzo Ken.”

“But isn’t that just more training? How will that close the gap?”

He let go over her and closed his eyes, “Lynn is one of the strongest people in the world. I can barely lay a finger on him. But for as strong as he is, my master is a hundred times stronger. During my time training with him, I was never able to hit him even once.”

Tyrn eyes opened wide with understanding, “So you think that if you finish your training-?”

Jago nodded, “Then I’ll have strength comparable to my Master’s. He wouldn’t stand a chance against me.”

Tyrn folded her arms, trying to think, “That could be the answer. However, training with your master could take a while. You’d have to get permission for leave. And you wouldn’t know how long you’d be gone for.”

“I know,” Jago said, “We have to be willing to take the risk. As it is now, we’re just sitting ducks for Lynn. If I take some incentive and finish my training, I’ll be able to beat him.”

“You’ll have to talk to General Tomath about this,” Tyrn said, doubtful that he’d let him go.

“I know, but I’m not too worried about that. I want you to join me,” he said.

“To talk with General Tomath?”

“No, I want you to join me in my training,” he said, his eyes serious.

“Why? Won’t I just get in the way of your training?” she asked.

“No. I believe the opposite to be true. With you by my side, I’ll never give up.” He grabbed her hands, “Don’t you see? You’ve had my back for so long. Every time I make a breakthrough, you’re there with me.”

Tyrn shrugged, “I don’t mind going, if that’s what’ll help. You’ve just been always so secretive of your technique. Won’t being there with you expose me to that?”

Jago shook his head, “Don’t worry. There’s not a lot I can give away by just watching.”

Tyrn placed a hand on her forehead, “I’m a bit worried, though. Who’ll look after the Company while we are on leave?”

Jago grinned, “Seth, of course.”

Tyrn stared at him for a minute before bursting into laughter. Jago nervously chuckled with her, rethinking his decision to leave Seth in charge.

“What?” he asked, “He’s next in line after you.”

“Jago, tell me honestly. Do you think he’s even disciplined enough?”

Jago scratched his head, “Well, he does owe me big time from a few

weeks ago, so I'm sure we'll be okay."

Tyrn threw her hands in the air, "Whatever. It's not like he's going to be doing anything crazy anyways. Should we go ask General Tomath then?"

Jago smiled at her, "I already have, which is why I told you I wasn't worried about getting permission. He agreed that it was the only course of action."

"Why didn't you tell me that from the start?" Tyrn asked irritably.

Jago shrugged, "It doesn't matter. Anyway, let's get going. We have a long journey ahead of us."

Tyrn nodded, "Right." They walked in haste out of the base, prepared for whatever lied ahead.

Lynn moved his left arm slowly, testing it. The ligaments had been completely torn to shreds. They had to perform invasive surgery on him, replacing most of his arm with new cells. His arm was sore and stiff. He could feel the diminished power. The battle had cost him. He had been out of the war since he and Jago fought.

He paced through his test, his blood boiling with excitement. *He can beat me*, Lynn thought, *he's grown much stronger*. He grinned, *He's become a worthy warrior at last*. He rolled down his sleeve, trying to hide the stiffness in his arm. He walked outside his tent where his legion awaited for him. His father had left it all to him, while he waited in his palace. That is what he promised Lynn when he joined him, power immeasurable. And Lynn could not only see it before him, but feel it in every pore of his body.

He had sacrificed much for this power, his friends, his home, his sense of morality. But it wasn't enough, he wanted something more. He knew that only Jago could provide it for him, that sense of fulfillment. He knew he'd learn what he lacked when he destroyed him once in for all. Lynn stopped, his blood cold. He clenched his fists tight.

Jago, you were once my friend. I was always jealous of what you had, a family, a life, and when you went off to train, power. I sought that for myself. I know that you probably can't forgive me for what I've done to you, I know that I can't. I just never was meant to belong. A prince can not give up his destiny, his right to rule. So I had to break all that held me back.

He turned away from his army, his eyes downcast. He looked at his hands. *But there was one thing that I couldn't break. The one thing that no matter how hard I try, I still can't break. You're still my friend, and I couldn't kill you anymore than I could kill my father.* He gritted his teeth, *My father. I don't think I could possibly hate anyone so much as him. It's his fault that all of this happened. If he hadn't abandoned me in the first place, I would've never been forced to... You saw me smiling in the rain, but ... really ... I had no choice.*

He remembered his blood stained hands, the lifeless faces of those he had once protected. He sat down on the ground, hunched over. *It has to end. There won't be a happy ending for either of us, I'm afraid. One of us has to die. And when I see you broken, I'll be the king that I was meant to be. I'll have nothing to hold me back.* He looked up at the setting sun, his body shrouded in darkness and felt the same emptiness he always did.

Chapter 13

*I saw him fly through the
sky like an angel, or a
devil. I could never tell
which. It was both majestic
and terrifying.*

- Chirot Pale: Corvan Civilian

Jago and Tyrn jumped out of the bed of the truck as they reached the base of the Yanzu Mountains. Jago thanked the driver in his native tongue as he surveyed the land before him.

“Ahh, the Yanzu Heights,” he said sentimentally, “it’s been awhile since I’ve been here.”

Tyrn hugged her arms tight, “It’s freezing out here, Jago,” she shivered, “Why don’t you have a coat on?”

Jago shrugged, “You get used to it.”

“This master of yours, how far away is he?” Tyrn asked, wanting to seek warmth as soon as possible.

Jago thought for a moment, “It’s a two day hike give or take a few hours.”

Tyrn shuttered, this wasn’t going to be very pleasant for her, “Well, we better get moving,” she said through her chattering teeth.

“Is your pack heavy?” Jago asked in concern, “I can take it if you need me to. It’s a steep climb.”

Tyrn wanted to agree at once, but her pride wouldn’t let her. “I’m fine on my own, thank you.”

Jago folded his arms, “Are you sure? It’ll be harder for you since you haven’t acclimated.”

“What about you? Don’t you have to acclimate as well?”

Jago grinned, “Not really. I’m just special that way.”

Tyrn muttered sarcastically under her breath, “You are certainly special, I’ll give you that.”

“What was that?” Jago asked, not quite hearing her.

Tyrn waved her hand at him, “Oh, nothing. Let’s get going.”

Jago just shrugged and they started to hike.

“What is your master like?” Tyrn asked as they were hiking, “What was his name again? Ro-something?”

“Roken Jiryuku is the greatest man I know,” Jago stated with a smile, “He’s infinitely wise, and he is as strong as the mountains. He’s also very old and experienced.”

Tyrn suddenly thought of a wise old man meditating on top of a mountain, “So, he’s some sort of hermit?”

Jago grinned, “I guess you could say that.”

Tyrn stopped, unsettled by Jago’s grin, “What’s so funny?”

Jago just shook his head and continued hiking, “You’ll see when we get there.”

Jago refused to say anything more about his master and they continued hiking until it was almost dark. Jago looked up at the sky, the air was starting to chill. He looked around and started walking to a set of dead trees.

“We should set up camp for the night,” Jago said thoughtfully, “the temperature will drop soon.”

“Even more so?” Tyrn shivered.

“Much more... You remembered to bring a thermal sleeping bag, right?”

Tyrn nodded in the affirmative, worrying that she wouldn’t be able to speak due to the cold.

“Good, then I’ll start a fire and make dinner,” Jago said pleasantly.

He walked to the nearest tree, paused for a moment, and then punched it hard. The tree came tumbling down. Tyrn’s eyes nearly popped out of her head.

“Was that Ti?” she wondered in amazement.

Jago looked at her puzzled, “What this? No, I just punched it down.”

“Normal people can’t punch down trees!”

“I’m far from being a normal person,” Jago responded as he lifted the large trunk from off the ground.

That’s for sure, Tyrn thought as she wondered what Jago was doing with the tree.

Jago threw it high into the air, twenty meters off the ground. Tyrn watched in amazement as he jumped up after it and bombarded it with a flurry of punches and kicks. Jago returned to the ground with a bundle of wood, neatly broken up.

“Are you even human?!” Tyrn demanded as he stacked the pile into

a circle.

Jago chuckled, “My reaction was much like yours when I first saw my master do this. Rest assured, it’s all completely natural, no Ti involved.”

Tyrn had always known Jago was impossibly strong, but this was absurd. Now she knew why he never seemed to be worried whenever twenty men surrounded him.

He stared intensely at the wood, his hands together. Tyrn recognized the motion. He always did it before he did a special technique. She thought for sure he was about to use Ti. The air started to thicken as he thrust his hands out. The wood erupted in flames and the campfire roared to life. Tyrn just watched silently, speechless.

“Now let’s see,” Jago said as he rummaged through his pack, “beans, carrots, cheese, jerky” He grabbed a pot, “With these I can make a tasty stew.”

As the food cooked, Tyrn listened to the sounds of the wild, the whistle of trees, the chirps of the birds and insects, the trickle of a nearby stream, and sighed contentedly. There was a certain charm to the wilds. It was much more peaceful than city or military life. It was abuzz with life, in a way she hardly had seen before. She stared into Jago’s eyes, lit by the fire. They were softer, less hard than she had ever seen them. She imagined that this is what he must have looked like before his parents died.

After they finished eating, the sun began to set, and the stars started to appear. Chill snapped at both of them, threatening them with frost.

“It’s best if we sleep now before we lose more body heat,” Jago said testing the air, “You’ll want to sleep in your clothes, boots and all or

you could get frostbite.”

Tyrn went inside the tent Jago had set up for her and started to pull out her sleeping bag. She then realized that only one tent had been set up and started blushing furiously.

“We’re sharing a tent?” she stammered.

“Of course,” Jago replied as if it was obvious, “We need to conserve our body heat. It could get very dangerous for the both of us otherwise.”

He looked at Tyrn for a second and noticed her burning cheeks. His eyes opened wide as he realized what Tyrn was thinking and spluttered, “There’s nothing romantic about it! I’ll be in my bag, you’ll be in yours.”

Tyrn looked away, embarrassed that she did not realize it sooner. Jago narrowed his eyes at her and thought, *What’s going on in her mind?* He started to put out the fire and by the time he went into the tent, Tyrn was fast asleep, exhausted from the long day. He got out his sleeping bag and laid down up against Tyrn. He could feel her warmth through her bags.

This sure brings back memories of when I camped with Master. It was never awkward back then, though, he thought as he struggled to fall asleep. *Of course, we never had tents or bags, and most of the time I was left to myself to unlock my Ti.* He remembered those days of torment fondly, they had helped build him up. *Of course, if I hadn’t been pushed to the edge, I would have never learned.* His last thoughts were of his master as he drifted off to sleep.

Tyrn woke several hours later, shivering in cold. Her body and face were freezing. As she turned in her bag, she noticed that Jago was gone. Concerned, she got out of the sleeping bag and tend and looked around.

Nearby, Jago sat on the ground in deep meditation, his hands together and his legs crossed. He was covered in frost.

“J-Jago... W-what are you d-doing?” Tyrn chattered.

Jago looked up surprised, his concentration broken. “Sorry, did I wake you? I should have known that the cold would wake you up.”

“You l-look l-like y-your fr-rozen, Jago! What on earth are you d-doing?!” Tyrn demanded.

“I couldn’t sleep so I decided to meditate,” he stated simply. “Besides, I’m totally fine. Like I said earlier, the cold can’t bother me.”

Tyrn stood there shivering, “Well, go back to sleep. I can’t sleep because of you. It’s too cold.”

Jago smiled, a thought occurred to him, “I know a way you can keep warm.”

“What?” she asked skeptically, that smile unnerving her.

Jago opened his arms to her, “Come here, I’ll show you.”

Tyrn approached cautiously, *What is he thinking?* she wondered. As she walked towards him, Jago pointed to the ground.

“Sit,” he commanded, “like how I’m doing.”

Tyrn sat, the ground was wet with frost and dew.

“Now,” Jago instructed, “bring your hands together, like this.” Jago’s hands formed a circle, “Make sure they’re slightly above your stomach.”

Tyrn did as she was commanded, puzzled as to how this would keep her warm. “Is this some form of Ti?”

Jago brought a finger to his lips to hush her. She dropped her voice, doing as he commanded.

“Now breathe. Breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth. Do it slowly now.”

Tyrn breathed in and out, her body calming. She closed her eyes.

“Now listen. Listen to my voice.”

Tyrn listened, entranced by his voice.

“Imagine the sun inside your mind. Its warmth, its brightness. Feel the rays on your body.”

Tyrn tried to do as instructed. It all felt really pointless.

“Now feel,” Jago commanded, “Feel the sun inside your body, right above your stomach. Feel its heat go through your skin. It’s always been there. Just pull it out.”

Tyrn tried to imagine that sun, that warmth, that heat, in her body. She gasped. Above the pit of her stomach she felt a warmth spread throughout her body. She stopped shivering. She looked in with amazement at Jago.

Jago grinned, “See I knew you could do it. This uses as little Ti as possible, so you shouldn’t have to worry about loss. You might be tired in the morning though.”

Millions of questions flooded into Tyrn’s mind as she considered what had just happened.

“Why didn’t you show me how to do this earlier?” she demanded. She had been freezing their entire journey up the mountain.

Jago was caught off guard. This wasn’t the question that he was

expecting. He looked away sheepishly.

“What?” she demanded to know.

“Well,” Jago coughed, “It’s expressly forbidden to show you any of the Mugen Shinzo Ken, and there is a good chance that if my master finds out I taught you this, he’d expel me as a pupil.”

Tyrn’s heart melted at Jago’s kindness. He risked their purpose for being there, for her. She held one arm and smiled at Jago and softly spoke, “Thanks Jago. I appreciate the risk you’re taking for me.”

Jago shrugged, “I’m not about to let you freeze to death, and as long as we don’t tell my master, I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Thanks again,” she stammered, “I think I’ll be able to sleep fine now, thanks to you.”

“You go on back asleep, I’ll be here awhile.”

Tyrn made her way back to the tent, yawning, “Okay, goodnight Jago.”

Jago smiled as he turned back to his meditation, “Goodnight Lieutenant.”

Chapter 14

*All around me the world
was ending. Everyone was
my enemy. I couldn't find
any peace of mind, any
solace. The fires burned
our homes down.*

- Noldyk Varin: the Last Iratian Rebel

The next morning they set out for his master. Tyrn was uncomfortable. There wasn't anywhere for her to shower or get ready, and her feet were starting to blister due to their hike and her pack. She looked like a mess, her hair kept falling in her face, and she was dirtier than a pig.

Jago kept a cool pace throughout the hike. He looked perfectly fine. While they were hiking, he kept whistling the same nameless tune. It was driving Tyrn crazy to do so well.

"How much further are we?" she huffed in desperation.

Jago turned to look at her, concerned with how exhausted she looked, "We still have about two hours left."

Tyrn huffed out.

"You're not used to this altitude. Here," he said grabbing her pack, "I'll carry this for you. It's all uphill from here."

Tyrn was about to protest but thought better of it and accepted Jago's kindness graciously, "Thanks Jago. I appreciate it."

Upwards they hiked, almost reaching the clouds above them. Tyrn was amazed that Jago still seemed to be faring better than her. *This just*

isn't fair, she thought as they hiked.

The sun just started to set as they approached their destination. Rocky and grassy terrain stood before them, with a few sparse trees. On the far side of where they entered was the top of the mountain. A waterfall flowed down it into a small lake that was as clear as the air. Next to the lake, there was a large mansion, magnificent and grand. It had great golden columns, gold trimming, and was embroidered with many patterns and designs. It took Tyrn's breath away to see something so grand out there.

A little ways in front of the mansion, there stood a man, broad shouldered and majestic. He stood at least two meters tall. He wore a gilded crimson cape, draped magnificently over his shoulders. He wore cloth wraps around his arms, a simple aqua tunic, and white pants. His belt around his waist was simple, tied with a square knot.

Jago looked into his master's face, and his heart skipped a beat. Roken's face with grim, almost angry looking. He was not happy to see him.

"Jago," he said, curt. He ran towards him, almost vanishing.

"Master!" Jago returned as he vanished as well.

Tyrn stood there dumbfounded as their fists collided, making the ground shake. They continued striking at each other, almost like a dance.

"The school of the Mugen Shinzo Ken!" Roken Jiryuku shouted, his arms sweeping towards Jago.

"The Waves of Separation!" Jago replied thrusting his hands forward.

“Seishin!” Roken roared, pulling his hands back, a fiery blue dragon encompassing his body.

“Karada!” Jago bellowed, bringing his hands back like his master, a flaming red dragon encircling him.

They brought both hands out towards each other, their fists colliding in mid-air.

“Tamashi to Kokoro!!!” They shouted in unison.

The area around them was engulfed in light. Their dragons soared high in the air. Air pushed away from them, surrounding the area with a powerful gust.

“Through our hearts our fists shall grasp eternity!” They finished, lightning shooting out of their hands.

Tyrn watched in awe at their greeting. She doubted anyone had ever seen something so inspiring before.

Roken placed his hands on Jago’s shoulders, “It’s good to see you Jago.”

“It’s good to see you too Master,” Jago replied, “You have no idea.”

“But what brings you here? I heard you joined the Irati army and are now using the Mugen Shinzo Ken in war. I feel that your heart has much sorrow, tell me what has passed since I have last seen you.”

Tears started to form in Jago’s eyes, “Master, it’s so good to see you. I don’t even know where to start.”

“Start with telling me what made you join the Irati arm.”

As Jago expounded upon what had happened the previous years,

Tyrn studied Roken Jiryuku.

So this is Roken Jiryuku, she thought, impressed. Jago told me that he was very old, but he doesn't look a day older than 35. That long shiny black hair pulled back in a band, those broad, thick arms and shoulders, those heart piercing, dark eyes. He looks like he's at his prime.

As Jago finished telling his master about his life, compassion shone through Roken's eyes, "I'm sorry that you had to go through all that, Jago. One should never have to see a loved one die. I had no idea that so much has happened."

Roken glanced around and seemed to notice Tyrn, "But now is not time for such sadness. Please Jago, introduce me to this beautiful young woman. Is she your wife?"

Jago was taken off guard and started stuttering. Tyrn clicked her heels together and saluted Roken, "First Lieutenant Tyrn Ridner, sir."

"Another soldier?" Roken looked disappointed. "Well, can't do anything about that. What brings you out here? It can't be duty or an assignment."

Tyrn pointed at Jago, "Wherever he goes, I go. We're partners. We've got each other's backs through thick and thin."

Roken raised his eyebrows, feeling Jago's emotions, "Partners?" He smiled, "I see now."

Jago, who was quite irritated with the conversation spoke up, "Master, that's not important. I've come to finish the training that I started all those years ago. I have finished the Warrior's Journey."

Roken looked keenly at Jago, "That's for me to decide."

Jago looked crestfallen; he thought he would get to training right away.

Roken looked at the sky, “Well, now is not the time to worry about such things.” He motioned with his hand, “Come. Let’s go inside and eat some dinner.”

As they entered the mansion, Tyrn noticed how many ancient memorabilia there were laying around. Swords, spears, armor, painting, all of it showed a great history.

“What is all of this from?” she asked, curious.

“Oh, those?” Roken replied, “Each one of them comes from a battle I fought at one time or another.”

“Some of this is ancient armor,” Tyrn rebutted, thinking he misunderstood her.

“Yep, I think the furthest it goes back is 1100 years or so.”

Tyrn was puzzled by his response, “Sir. Just how old are you?”

Roken stood there, puzzled, trying to count the years, “Let’s see. I’ll turn 1224 this coming fall.”

“What?!” Tyrn spluttered in disbelief, “How is that possible?!”

Roken shrugged his shoulders, “That is a long story, it would take hours to explain.”

Tyrn looked at Jago for an explanation; he just raised his hands up and shrugged. He had no idea how his master lived so long either.

“I assume you don’t have a place to stay,” Roken said, grabbing their packs, “I have many rooms here, each with a bathroom. Pick any

you want.”

Tyrn picked a room next to Jago’s once Roken left to prepare dinner, “Your master sure has superfluous taste.”

Jago nodded, “That’s for sure. It’s been like this since before I met him. I think he wants anyone who climbs up here to know who the best is.”

“I guess when you’re 1200 years old, you can use a little extravagance.”

Jago laughed, “That’s true, I guess.”

As they finished putting their stuff in their rooms, Tyrn stretched and said, “Man, I’m beat. I’ve been dying for a shower. Would you tell your master where I am if dinner is ready?”

Jago grinned, “There’ll be no need. He knows how tired you are. He’s always one step ahead. I’m going to take a shower myself.”

“It sure is nice to have a personal bathroom.”

“Not that I’ve ever used these before,” Jago grinned. “In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever stayed in here overnight before.”

Tyrn’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, “What do you mean? Didn’t you train here?”

Jago chuckled, “Well, yeah, but I’ve always been training. Whenever I was here, I slept outside.”

Tyrn narrowed her eyes, “Didn’t you say you stayed here for years? It’s freezing enough as it is, and it is summer. You had to stay outside during the winter?”

Jago shook his head, “You don’t even know the half of it. It’s a

miracle that I survived at all.”

Tyrn was starting to get nervous. This training sounded way more intensive than she thought it would be, “Will you be okay?”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine, nothing I can’t handle.”

She turned to her room, “Well then, I’m going to shower.”

Jago nodded, turning back to his room. He didn’t like showering, though he did it every day. Whenever he felt the water come down on his skin, it reminded him of that night, over five years ago. He saw his family,, broken and lifeless, Lynn standing there in the rain, covered with blood, smiling. As the hot water covered his skin, he cleared his mind. He had forgotten his true purpose when he saw his master, remembering old times. His purpose was Lynn. Tyrn, his master, this peaceful mountain had all distracted him from that. Lynn beat him last time, even with the Alpha Gear. He needed to be stronger! Jago’s eyes grew hard as steel, determined. He wasn’t going to waste any time out here.

He dressed himself in the traditional Mugen Shinzo en uniform, an aqua tunic, white pants, and a belt tied with a square knot. He was ready to begin.

As he exited his room, he waited for Tyrn. *Master won’t have dinner quite ready yet.*

As he waited, he heard a loud crash and a yelp come from her room. He burst into the room in concern.

“Tyrn, are you okay?!” he shouted as he burst in.

Tyrn was sprawled out on the ground, extremely embarrassed. She was wearing a simple t-shirt and shorts. Next to her, the suit of armor

that was in her room was on the ground.

“What happened,” Jago asked, puzzled.

Tyrn got up, blushing furiously, “As I was pulling my shorts up, I kicked the armor accidentally, and it fell on me.”

Jago stared at her for a moment in disbelief and then burst into laughter, clutching his side. Tyrn, irritated at Jago, punched him hard in the shoulder, “You jerk!”

Jago kept laughing, “Sorry, I can’t help it.”

Tyrn turned her back to Jago and started walking to the dining room.

“Hey! Don’t walk away!” Jago shouted after her, “Listen. I’m sorry I laughed.”

Tyrn didn’t reply. She was still upset at him. She simply ignored him, mortified that he walked in at all.

As they approached the kitchen, the savory smell of lobster protruded throughout the room.

“Mmm,” Tyrn sighed as she approached Roken, cooking, “What is that savory smell?”

Roken smiled, “It’s my famous lobster bisque.”

“Where’d you learn to cook,” she asked, interested.

Roken waved his ladle, “Here a little, there a little.”

He looked at Jago, “You’d better be prepared, Jago. This will be your last meal for awhile.”

Jago groaned, he was hoping to avoid this.

Tyrn ears perked in interest, remembering what Jago had told her, “Why? Won’t he be staying here.”

Roken laughed, “He wishes. He won’t be sleeping either. Before I can even test his strength to see if his Warrior’s Journey is complete, he must meditate on the top of the mountain for a week.”

“Without food, water, or sleep?” she inquired, her concern for Jago increasing.

“Of course,” Roken replied smiling, “How else is he supposed to prepare to face me? I doubt he could stomach anything up there anyway if he tried.”

Tyrn remained silent, her irritation with Jago all but dust now.

“The food’s almost ready,” Master Jiryuku hummed, “Let’s take this moment to thank the Creator for the food that we have.”

After the prayer, the three enjoyed an amazing but simple meal, complete with fresh bread and sharp cheese.

“This is the best soup I’ve ever had,” Tyrn stated in amazement, “How do you cook like this?”

Roken grinned, “With a little bit of magic. When you’ve lived as long as I’ve had, you’d be the best chef on Earth, too.”

Jago ate silently, barely hearing their conversation. He thought about what he had to go through in the following week. It wasn’t going to be easy. He needed to be prepared. It wasn’t the eating or sleeping that bothered him; it was the fact that he had to fight his master in mortal combat. Roken Jiryuku, the strongest man alive. He got up.

“I’m going now,” he declared as they laughed about a joke, “to

prepare.”

Their laughter broke. Tyrn looked at Tyrn in worry; she couldn't help him with this. Roken nodded; the air was still.

“Do you want me to join you,” Tyrn asked, knowing the answer.

Jago shook his head, “No. This is something that I must do alone.”

The time for remembering fond memories had passed. The preparation to fight his master had begun.

Chapter 15

*We were crushed like ants
before their power. Had it
not been for him, we all
would have died.*

- Jarl Kidif: Iratian Soldier

Jago sat on top of the snow capped in mountains, the frost and ice far from his mind. He could feel the sun pass overhead, the wind nip his cheeks, the ice melt under him. But he ignored all of that. He only listened; he listened for the sound of his heart, each beat slower than the last.

He took deep breaths, calming his mind. He ignored the cold, turning his thoughts inward. He closed his eyes. He was surrounded by darkness, and he was there, alone in it. His mind sought out after light, seeking some semblance of mental warmth. A small light filled his mind, a small orb, no bigger than his heart. It beat like it did too, pulsating outwards. Every pulse, every beat, filled Jago with energy. A chill ran through his body, his hairs stood on end. It was electric.

He sat for hours, letting that electricity flow through his body, responding to his every thought. He thought first of Lynn, his form taking shape in his mind. The orb pulsed furiously, it's white light turning blood red. His body tensed up, his arms and legs started to tremble. *No*, Jago thought, *this isn't it*.

Lynn was replaced by an image of his master. The orb beat slowly, glowing bright gold, flowing like a river through his body. Energy surged through his veins. He thought of all the times he sparred with his master, of what he always did. He played through simulation after

simulation in his mind, trying to find a way to beat him. They all ended in failure. Sweat dripped down Jago's face.

If Lynn's ability was an ocean away from Jago's, then Roken's was an entire planet away. He could feel his power in his mind, the power of the sun, and he was a small flame, ready to be snuffed out. *How*, he thought, his mind racing furiously, *how is he so much stronger than me?* He remembered all of the lessons that his master had taught him, all of the pain and trials that he had to go through.

He remembered with awe when he first met his master, over ten years ago. He had been a young teenager then, enjoying spending time with his brother, Ian, who he fished with every day. It was at a small lake where they lived that he first met him, perched underneath a tree, not having a care in the world.

At first, his brother and him had ignored him. They just thought he was a regular guy, enjoying the outdoors like they were. And then he moved. Jago had never seen something so fast. He moved like lightning, swiftly getting up, moving to the lake, grabbing a couple of fish, and then laying back down again in the blink of an eye. He placed them on a stick, which then bursted into flames. His brother's eyes and his nearly popped out of their sockets.

They pestered him, asking who he was.

Roken chuckled, "Who, me? I'm just a man, looking for someone to teach."

"What are you teaching,?" Jago had asked, incredulous that he had seen something so amazing.

Roken turned his hands to the fish, "How to catch life."

“What do you mean?” Ian had asked, confused.

“You boys sure ask a lot of questions,” he said, smiling. He looked at Jago, “I’ve watched you for awhile now, and I think that you have what it takes.”

Jago’s eyes opened wide in surprise, “Me? You’ve been watching me?”

“Of course, I had to see you in person first,” Roken said, ignoring him, “Your grandfather was right. You can be something special.”

“You know our grandpa?” Ian asked, amazed.

“How much do you know about him?” Roken asked the two boys.

Jago raised his fist, “He’s really strong. They call him the Shining Dragon. He fought in a lot of wars and saved a lot of people.”

Roken chuckled, “That he did.”

Ian raised his hand, “They say he has a special power, Ri or something like that.”

Roken nodded, “Close enough.”

“Who are you?” Jago inquired, feeling something great coming from this man.

Roken got up and placed his hand on Jago’s head, “Starting today, you can call me Master.”

Jago smiled as he remembered his training with Roken. It truly had been a nightmare. He had never had so many near death experiences in his life. But through those, something awoke in him, a power he didn’t know that he had. He could feel the Ti in his cells, in the very atoms

that composed his body.

He turned his mind back to the matter at hand and concentrated. The orb in his mind was pulsing stronger and stronger. His body began to be shrouded in golden light, lifting him off of the ground. He hovered in the air, his legs still crossed, concentrating. The air around him grew heavy. Sparks started to fly off of his body. The clouds below him started to grow around him, surrounding him in gray mist. Arcs of electricity jumped back and forth between him and the clouds.

There has to be a way! Jago thought as the sparks flew off of his body. There's something I'm missing, something that causes my use of Ti to be flawed. Sure, my master has me beat in raw physical strength, but we're both human beings, we should both have the same amount of Ti. His master appeared before him in his mind again, as tall as a mountain. But we don't, is it because he's lived so long? I was taught how to manipulate bonds close to my body, but that seems like peanuts compared to what he can do.

His master's voice appeared in his mind, "It's not about how strong you are. No matter who you are, there'll always be someone stronger than you. You must use that to your advantage, close the gap between you. Be a conduit of their own power, and you'll find that their strength will be yours."

You've always told me that Master, but you've never told me what it means. How can I use their power? Isn't my power the only one I can use, doesn't Sōn prevent me from doing so? I feel like I'm missing something so basic, so key to my success.

His body glowed brighter and brighter, vibrating violently. Jago could feel a drain on his energy. This wasn't getting him anywhere. He would have to start again, at the very beginning of what he had been

taught.

His mind tore through line by line what he was taught, trying to find anything that could help him. It kept coming up blank. He searched through every move, every position, every pose, trying to find something, anything. His body was drenched with sweat, his breathing heavy. He collapsed onto the melted ground, his eyes bursting open.

He looked at the night sky, the stars overhead. He clenched his fists tightly. *What am I missing?!* His body exploded with energy at once, a giant lightning bolt shooting from him down the mountain. He passed out into blackness.

Tyrn looked out of her window to the mountaintop, which she did every night since she had been there. Six days had already passed. She hoped Jago was okay. When she talked to Roken about him, he didn't say much other than not to worry. But she did anyway. She saw sparks flying off of the mountain, which she was sure was Jago. He had been trying hard. She just hoped he wouldn't push himself too far.

Jago woke with a start. *How long has it been?* he wondered. His arms and legs were stiff, his throat dry, his stomach rumbling. He looked up, it was still night. He had been out for only a few minutes. His body was covered in bruises. *I really over did it this time*, he thought as he stood up.

“What does it take!?” he shouted at the sky, “What am I missing?! TELL ME!!”

He pounded his fists on the ground, frustrated. *This is the final night*, he thought as he knelt on the ground, *and I'm no closer than I*

was before. He ran his hands through his hair. Maybe this is it, Jago thought, maybe this is where I've proven my limits as a man. As I am now, I'll never be able to pass Master's test. He punched the ground, cracking it. I have one more night left, I can't give up now! He pushed his body further, trying to surpass his limits. He took no breaks, did not stop, and soon it was morning.

Chapter 16

*I watched their battle,
there power tearing up the
sky. I felt only sorrow as
they attacked each other;
men who were once
friends.*

- The Wanderer

The sun rose over the mountain, cascading the lake in morning light. Jago stood before his master, bruised and ragged. He had not figured out what he was missing. Roken stood majestically as he always did, they gilded cape across his shoulders. Tyrn looked on at the two of them, her heart burdened with worry.

“Jago, you have been brought me today to prove yourself worthy of the final secrets of the Mugen Shinzo Ken, having completed your Warrior’s Journey,” Roken stated, as if he were reciting a speech. “For this, I shall test you in your knowledge of the Waves of Separation., which governs our fist. Have you prepared sufficiently well for the trial set before you?”

Jago hesitated; he knew the answer he should give, but he didn’t know if he truly was prepared or not. His body was covered in yellow blotchy bruises from head to toe, his mind was exhausted, his body pushed to its limits. This would not be a simple school test, where one could fail without worry. He was putting his life on the line. He stared into the eyes of his master, determined. He clenched his fists.

“I have,” he answered.

“Know that this trial puts your life on the line,” Roken declared, “So

I'll ask again. Are you ready?"

Jago nodded, "I'll never be more ready than now."

"Then," Roken dropped into a fighting stance, "Let's begin."

He rushed forward at Jago, the distance between them vanishing. Jago barely had time to block his first punch, the force of which pushed him back ten meters. Roken didn't let up his assault. He punched and kicked at Jago, who could only block in return. He had no opportunity to attack.

"Your slow, Jago" Roken stated, breaking Jago's guard. He punched him in the chest, the force of which sent Jago flying.

"AHH!" Jago screamed in pain, crashing into the ground.

He clumsily rolled back up onto his feet, his ribs aching. Roken didn't relent his attack, his arms and legs moved leg a tornado, sweeping everything in their path. Jago was overwhelmed, he had no power to stop his attack. He clapped his hands together, sparks flying out of them. His body was shrouded in electric blue light.

"Riki!" He shouted as his master approached him.

His master jumped backwards, avoiding the technique. Jago chased after him, much faster than before. He was on the offensive now. His master skillfully avoided all of his attacks, his face displaying no emotion.

"Good," he said as he clapped his hands, his body shrouded in the same electric light as Jago's, "the Riki is the first step of Mugen Shinzo Ken combat."

He closed the distance between Jago and himself, each step he took

cracked the ground beneath him.

“But,” he said pulling his arm back, “Yours stands no chance against mine.”

An explosion erupted from his fist, which sent Jago flying.

“ERGH,” Jago grunted as he tried to control his movements midair. He took a swift step in the air. The air around him cracked, and he propelled himself forward at his master.

Roken smiled at the oncoming Jago, “Kudan, excellent. Using your Ti to run through the air.”

He caught his punch, kicking him in the stomach, and then threw him high into the air. Jago gasped for breath, unable to control his movements.

Roken fly up in the air after him, not having to take steps at all. Soon he was above Jago.

“Of course, the Chō Soku surpasses it in every way, shape, and form, if you bring down the Sōn enough,” he said bringing both fists together, slamming them down on Jago’s head.

Jago careened towards the ground, barely conscious. Right before he crashed, he clapped his hands together, and spun in the air, his feet shrouded in the light.

“Shun,” he said, rocketing back up towards his master. His hand was wrapped in the blue light. He punched at his master, “Ten Ken!”

The area in front of his master transformed into a lightning storm. Before any bolts hit him, Roken, brought his hand forward, “Bō!” he shouted, the lightning redirected at Jago.

Jago could not stop it, his body erupted in flames, powerful shocks were sent through his body.

“RAH!” he screamed, his body frozen in the air.

Roken moved his arms in a circle, an afterimage of his arms remaining when he moved them.

“Roku Hikari Ken,” he stated, thrusting his arms forward.

A large crack shook the sky. Jago was pushed back hundreds of meters, crashing into the ground. Roken landed on the ground near him. Jago slowly got up on his knees; Roken kept his guard down, not readying to attack.

Jago jumped forward at his master, an electric blue dragon wrapping itself around his arm.

“HIKARI NO RYU KEN!” Jago shouted as he thrust his arm forward.

Roken caught his hand, the dragon was swallowed into his aura, “Humph, you’ll never be able to hit me like.”

Jago ignored his master, and threw a kick at him. Roken grunted as the powerful kick hit him. He threw Jago away, sending him backwards. Jago grinned.

Roken spit on the ground, “This is disappointing. I didn’t think you’d gotten so weak.”

Jago’s grin dropped, “What do you mean?”

He turned his back to Jago, “As you are now, you’re not ready to learn the secrets of the Mugen Shinzo Ken.”

Jago clenched his fists tight, “I WAS ABLE TO HIT YOU,

WASN'T I?!"

"That's only because I was holding back. I see now why you've been having problems with Lynn."

Jago stood up, "What are you talking about?!"

Roken turned to face Jago, "When you left me, you were ten times stronger than you are now."

Jago's blood drained from his face, "What?"

Roken placed his hand on his forehead, "It's not entirely your fault. The shock you must've felt when seeing your parents died, it changed you. It broke you. When you left, you were a proud warrior. Now you're a boy who is paralyzed with fear! Do you know why Lynn can beat you?! It's because you're holding yourself back. You're so scared of failing that you've built a barrier around yourself!"

Jago's eyes opened wide with shock. He looked over to Tyrn, whose face was encased with worry.

"You're paralyzed with weakness! You stand there listening to me now, but you've ignored what's most important during the fight! You've lost your fighting spirit!"

His eyes pierced through Jago's. Jago felt like a helpless child.

"It's frozen, frozen on the night your parents died all those years ago! Your soul is so lost, so confused, that my fist cries out in pain!"

Jago's mind drifted back to that night, over five years ago, his trembling hands holding his dead brother in his arms, his soul crying out in pain. Jago's body started to tremble.

"You want to know why you have trouble controlling your Ti?! Do

you want to know why you lose so much energy?! You've thrown it away to hold onto that night five years ago! It's so sad, you had so much potential."

Jago stood in silence, the words piercing his heart. *Their deaths are holding me back? Am I afraid, afraid of forgetting them?*

"I know they meant the world to you, but you have to wake up! You've let your spirit freeze itself on the moment, feeding it strength! The world moves on without you! The more you think about them, the more power you lose! You have to let it go! YOU HAVE TO LET THEM REST IN PEACE BEFORE YOU DESTROY YOURSELF! I CAN BARELY STAND HERE AS YOUR MASTER TO SEE YOU SO MISERABLE!!!"

Jago's mind turned to his family, his tears frozen in the rain all those nights ago. He collapsed on his hands and knees. The happiness he had with his family returned, their smiles, their warmth. He could feel them surrounding him, their love for him as strong as ever.

"Open your heart and let them go!" Roken commanded, "The last thing they would want you to do is be the hate fueled boy you are now."

Tears streamed down Jago's face. The pain of their deaths, it hurt him so much. But his master was right, it was holding him back. He truly was nothing more than a little boy. But how, how was he supposed to let them go? How was he supposed to relieve himself of the pain, his fear?

"If you can not hit me with your next attack, with all that you have, then you can forget about learning the final secrets," Roken declared, readying himself to a fighting position again.

Jago could hardly move, but he got up regardless. His soul still cried

out in pain. He could feel it, his spirit crying out for freedom. All he could remember was his broken family, his tears, his pain. His body without him realizing it. He started to charge at his master, his scream deaf to his ears. He remembered Lynn's smiling face, his bloodstained hands. His soul trembled in fear.

“JAGO!” Tyrn shouted out in concern.

His mind snapped back to reality. His thoughts turned to her, of all what they had been through, of what they had experienced. He saw her smile, her stern face, her nagging. He remembered their time together, his determination to fight for her.

He remembered what he had said, “When I became your commanding officer, your partner, I was stuck in abyss of darkness and despair. I didn't care whether I lived or died. I only had hate in my heart. I was no different than a monster. You're the reason I was able to wake up from that nightmare, to finally see some light.”

Jago's eyes opened wide with realization. The light that was just a flicker in his mind, started to grow. *Someone worth protecting*. He felt something shatter inside of him. It felt like chains were loosed from his body. He gasped. His body started to fill with light, as bright as the sun.

Time stood still for a moment, he was no longer on top of the mountain with his master. He was surrounded by darkness. His body started to glow. Blue light surrounded his body in a whirlwind. He snapped back to reality.

“RAHHHH!!!” He screamed, pushing forward.

Roken's body was shrouded in light as well, “RAHH!!”

They took a single step towards each other, both arms punching at

each other. Giant golden dragons erupted from both of their hands.

“MUGEN RAI RYU KEN!!!!” they shouted in unison at each other.

The mountaintop exploded with golden energy. Lightning filled the sky, striking down randomly. The water in the lake hovered above the ground. The ground shook, the sky trembled. Smoke filled the area. As it cleared, Jago stood against his master, his fist in his master’s cheek.

Tyrn looked in awe and wonder. Jago was smiling, so was Roken.

“You did it!” she exclaimed excitedly.

Jago was drenched in sweat, his breathing heavy. He could feel the power surge through his body, like he hadn’t felt before.

“I DID IT!” He shouted to the skies as he collapsed onto the ground.

Roken picked him up, he was unconscious, “That you did. You finally broke through that sea of despair to grasp onto some true happiness. Had you not given your all in that last attack, you never would have hit me. Now, you are worthy of becoming a master of the Mugen Shinzo Ken.”

He walked over to Tyrn, handing her Jago’s body, “Will you take care of him?”

Tyrn clutched onto Jago’s body, “Of course.”

Roken moved his cape around his body, turning away from Tyrn, “I have to prepare.”

As he walked away he couldn’t drop his smile. *You did it, Jago. You overcame that which would have left most people crippled for life. Even if you didn’t learn these techniques, I believe that you could beat Lynn now. You were just a boy when you came here, broken and helpless.*

Now, you are a man, able to seize his destiny for himself. When our fists collided, your fighting spirit was the strongest I have ever seen. No more will you be haunted by the demons of your past.

*He had changed; no
longer was he the
miserable being that he
was beforehand. For the
first time since I had met
him, he looked truly happy.*

- Tyrn Ridner: Iratian Lieutenant

Several hours passed before Jago was able to stand again. Tyrn helped him to his feet. He stood taller than she had ever seen him before. The dark presence that was around him beforehand was now gone. Even though he looked exhausted, he looked stronger than ever before.

He held onto her, breathing heavily. Although his eyes were half closed, Tyrn could see that his eyes were lighter, no longer pitch black, but a warm brown. She helped him walk over to the lake, where he sat down on a large stone. He looked in wonder at his right hand; he felt power surging through his body, so much so that his body tingled all over.

He leaned against Tyrn, his body barely able to sit up straight. He turned his head on her shoulder, looking her in the eyes.

“I did it, right?” he huffed.

Tyrn smiled, he seemed so much more at ease, “Yes, you did it.”

He struggled to sit up straight and looked around, “Where’s Master?”

“He went to go prepare.”

Jago nodded, understanding, “How long have I been out?”

Tyrn let him rest his head on her shoulder again, “A couple of hours.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been so tired before,” he said, trying to sit up again.

Tyrn looked at him in worry, “Can I get you anything?”

Jago nodded, “Some food and water would be nice. I think that’s affecting me more than the lack of sleep.”

She gently got up and positioned Jago so that he could sit on his own, “I’ll be right back.”

Jago slowly slumped forward, “Thanks Tyrn, you’re the best.”

As she left, Jago was left pondering what had happened. He was having a hard time of believing it. He didn’t feel the great burden that was usually on him. He felt more open, more free. His raging hate that had almost consumed him seemed like a faraway memory now. He could finally notice the things around him, the birds singing, the grass sighing, the fish jumping. He sighed in contentment. He could get used to this.

Only a few minutes passed before Tyrn was back, bringing a jug of water and a plate of food. She barely put it in front of him before he started to devour his food.

“Famnks,” he said, eating as fast as he could.

After he was finished eating, he got up and stretched. He was no longer as exhausted as he was. He took a step forward and crashed to the ground. Tyrn got up in concern, but by the time she reached him,

Jago was fast asleep.

She smiled, *He needs some sleep right now. The grass is soft enough, he should be fine.*

It was almost nightfall when Roken returned. His face was grim, his body tense. Tyrn looked in his eyes, they flickered to her and Jago. She would've said he almost looked nervous or scared. Roken approached Jago, grabbing him by the back of the collar, waking him up.

"Get up!" he commanded gruffly.

Jago woke with a start and landed on his feet. His mind immediately focused in on his master. He was wide awake.

"It's time," he said taking a few steps back from him.

Jago only nodded in return. His body tensed up in anticipation, Roken looked so serious. His presence felt like death.

"We'll start with the basics," Roken stated. He pointed to Tyrn, "You. Leave now. You cannot witness what is about to happen."

Tyrn nodded and then ran back to the mansion, more than a little frightened by Roken.

"There are three basic techniques of the Mugen Shinzo Ken. What are they?" Roken commanded.

Jago placed his fist in front of him, facing towards the sky, "Sei. Power. Used for enhancing your body's abilities beyond their limits. The user shrouds a particular part of their body in Ti and then uses it to fight. Riki is the basis of this technique."

Jago brought his fist in, clapping his hands together, while squatting, "Kan. Armor. Used for protecting your body from bodily

harm. The user embeds the Ti into their body to prevent both physical attacks and Ti attacks. Jun is the basis of this technique.”

Jago thrust his hands out in front of him, forming a circle, “Tō, Projection. Used for manifesting Ti in attacks. The user emits a part of their Ti away from their body, manifesting it by their will. Ryu is the basis of this technique.”

Roken nodded, “That is correct. What is the largest concern when dealing with any of these?”

Jago thought for a moment, “Sen. User Transference. All of these uses of Ti cost the user a certain percentage of their total energy.”

Roken nodded again, “Right. How would you avoid Sōn, or loss of Ti?”

“Concentration,” Jago answered, “and practice. The more you practice and the better your concentration, the less Ti you’ll lose.”

Roken grinned, “That’s the way that you were taught. And you are right, that is the traditional method of avoiding Sen.”

He dropped into a stance, his legs spread to his shoulders in a squat, “However.” His body was shrouded in white light. “There’s more than one way to avoid Sen.”

Jago’s mouthed dropped as he saw his master start to glow. His body seemed like light, with the white aura around him. *He’s using both Sei and Kan at the same time!*

The ground around Roken began to tremble as small pebbles jumped off of the ground. Many of them gathered near his body, where they were then turned to ash. Sparks shot off from his body to the surrounding ground. Jago immediately recognized him using Tō. Roken

stopped his concentration and his body stopped glowing.

“The final secrets of the Mugen Shinzo Ken use Sei, Kan, and Tō simultaneously to transform you into the perfect warrior. This is the power that I have taught my students for over a thousand years, Shin Kyō, Divine Strength.”

Jago stood amazed. His master didn’t even look tired, yet he had done something he thought impossible. The amount of concentration to do all three at once was ludicrous. The Sen should have been enormous, yet Roken didn’t look any different than he had before. Jago had switched between the three different techniques rapidly before, but he had never done two of them together at the same time, let alone all three!

“To master this technique, you must find another way of avoiding Sen,” Roken stated, “It is imperative to your survival!”

Jago was dumbfounded; he had no idea of where to even start to avoid Sen. He had always been taught that practice and concentration were the only ways to avoid it. The rules of his universe shifted, and he no longer knew what he thought he had known.

“The Final Technique of the Mugen Shinzo Ken is split into three separate attacks that focus on this principle of Shin Kyō,” Roken dropped into the position he did beforehand. His body started to glow white as before.

He turned his gaze towards a nearby mountain top. Jago could see the Sei gather in his master’s feet as his body was encased with the strongest Kan he had ever felt. Roken jumped, the ground cracking beneath him. In a flash, he was at the mountain top. His body was surrounded by a glowing silver dragon.

“TETSU RYU KEN!” he shouted as he thrust his right fist forward into the mountain. The dragon raced out of his body onto the mountain, surrounded it with silverlight. It blew up into several large pieces. The large chunks of rock and ice threatened to hit the ground below. Roken stepped onto what was left of the mountain top, the chunks not even moving to him.

Jago saw Roken concentrate his Ti into his fists and feet with even more Sei and Kan than he thought was possible, leaving the rest of his body without Ti. He vanished into thin air, the air cracking at the breaking of the speed of sound. His master reappeared in front of the falling chunks of rock, his fists moving so fast that afterimages of them appeared.

“SHIN MAN KEN!” Roken said as he obliterated the chunks as fast as he said the words.

Only small pebbles remained of what was once the top of the mountain. However, he wasn’t finished. His body started to glow as he hovered through the air. Jago could see his body wrapped in Kan, while his fists were brimmed with Sei and Tō. He moved his arms in a circular motion around his body, before bringing his hands close to him, right above his stomach in a circle. His hands arced with electricity between each other, a ball of plasma forming in his hands.

He thrust his hands forward in a triangle, shouting, “MUGEN TENSATSU SOKEN!!!!!”

A blue beam of energy the width of the mountain top shot forward from his hands in electric blue light, destroying the pebbles in front of him. For kilometers, the beam traveled before hitting another mountain top. It exploded in a ball of blue fire. It was as if a nuclear explosion had detonated, destroying everything in its path. The shockwave of the

explosion could be felt by Jago, who estimated the other mountain to be over fifty kilometers away.

Roken gently glided down to where Jago was standing, the light around him slowly dissipating. Jago didn't know what to say and didn't know if he could speak if his master asked him. He was frozen in place, his body both terrified and excited.

“The first attack you saw, the Tetsu Ryu Ken, primarily focuses on Kan for its power. With it, Sei and Tō are infused to manifest the last of the dragon attacks, the Iron Dragon Fist, or the Tetsu Ryu Ken. By infusing your body with the strongest of Kan, you can pierce through anything.

“The second attack, the Shin Man Ken, focuses on Sei for its power. You infuse your fists and feet with Sei, to greatly enhance your speed and power. Additionally, all of your Tō and Kan are focused into your fists as well, which produces the afterimages that you saw. This technique fires 10,000 rapid fire punches at your opponent. If you meet a man who can stand from this attack, he would be immortal. This is the 10,000 Divine Fist, or the Shin Man Ken.

“The final attack, the Mugen Tensatsu Soken, or the Infinite Heavenly Slaying Team Fist, focuses on Tō for its power. It concentrates your Kan around your body, while focusing your Sei and Tō into your hands. You release your Ti in the form of a beam, which obliterates everything in its path.”

Roken sat down in front of him, “These moves were designed to play off of each other, like a game of rock-scissors-paper. The Tetsu Ryu Ken breaks through the Mugen Tensatsu Soken. The Mugen Tensatsu Soken obliterates the less defensive Shin Man Ken. And the Shin Man Ken, through its speed and rapid fire of attacks can break the

shield of the Tetsu Ryu Ken.”

His eyes jumped up to Jago’s, his face more grim, “This is what you’ll have to face by the end of next week. You’ll have to match all of my techniques against yours, or you will die.”

Jago took a step back, “Wait, what?”

Roken nodded, “You passed the trial, so you are worthy of learning these techniques. I’ll show you how to do them, and you’ll practice them continually in the meantime. However, knowledge of the forms only takes you so far. If you can not find a way to avoid Sen, you will die.”

Jago gulped. A week was so little time to learn something that he didn’t even know was possible. It’s not like he didn’t care about whether he lived or died anymore, either. He had to succeed.

Roken got up and clapped the dust off of his hands, “You’ll be at a disadvantage compared to the rest of the people I have trained. One of the purposes of the Warrior’s Journey is to discover the other way to avoid Sen. Of the 127 people I have trained, all but you had already known what the answer was before the trial even began. It took most over ten years to discover this.”

“I have a chance, right?” Jago asked, concerned.

Roken shrugged, “To learn in one week what took most a decade? I mean, it is possible, and you are skilled. It’s just that you’re not exceptional like your grandfather was. He picked up on how to avoid Sen before he even finished his original training with me.”

Jago’s shoulders slumped in hurt. He knew his grandfather was amazing, but it didn’t help him to know that he wasn’t anything special.

“Is there anyway around this time limit I have?” Jago asked his master, doubtful.

Roken shook his head, “No, since you’ve seen the last of the techniques, I can’t let you leave without learning them.”

“Couldn’t I stay here until I did?”

Roken placed his hands on Jago’s shoulders, looking him in his eyes, “We both know that you don’t have that much time. Lynn will be back on the field soon enough, and are the only one capable of stopping him.”

Jago brushed his master’s hands off of him, a little frustrated, “Why wouldn’t you be able to help me with that?”

“I don’t get involved with politics,” Roken answered, “Besides, I’m not to say which side is right in this war.”

“How can you say that?!” Jago demanded, “Lynn murdered my parents!”

Roken nodded, “That is true, but the Iratians have done many terrible things as well. No, one week is all you have to learn this material, end of discussion.”

Jago started to tremble in frustration, his master was just asking too much of him. He knew he wouldn’t convince him the more he tried, so he resigned himself to his fate. His eyes grew determined, *One week is all I need.*

“There’s something you should know before you start to train,” Roken said, his eyes downcast, “I’m not getting involved just because of politics.”

“What do you mean?” Jago asked, confused.

“Your true enemy is not Lynn, Jago. Remember that. Lynn is just a pawn to Edaj Forsigth’s game.”

“What does he have to do with this? I know that he’s strong.”

Roken looked into Jago’s eyes, unsettled, “No. You don’t understand. Before you were my pupil, Edaj was.”

“WHAT?!!” Jago shouted, “How could you not tell me this?!”

Roken looked away abashedly, “It wasn’t my place. Besides, before you came here, I had no idea what happened to your family.”

“You know what he’s done!” Jago shouted angrily, “Why haven’t you stopped him?!”

Roken looked into Jago’s eyes. His eyes, they were sad, full of regret and sympathy for Edaj.

“It’s not my place to stop him. He’s followed his own path of the Mugen Shinzo Ken. I know better than all why he fights. It is not for me to say whether either of you are right or wrong. This is why you must be the one to defeat him.”

“I don’t understand,” Jago paced back in forth in front of his master, “What will fighting him prove? I’ve tried to let go of the hate I had inside me. I just want to setup a future where I can live in peace.”

“He broke our laws,” Roken answered, “He knew that which is why he struck out against your family. It’s his statement of saying that he’s separated himself from me. He’s making his own mark on the world.”

“Then shouldn’t you be the one to stop him?! If he’s disregarded the rules of the Mugen Shinzo Ken, isn’t it your place as Master to stop

him?!”

“You don’t understand. He may be right. When I developed the Mugen Shinzo Ken, I believed that we should be passive observers, no more than onlookers to the goings on of the earth. Edaj believes that we should use the Mugen Shinzo Ken in everyday society and to let the governments of the world be governed by our teachings. I have no care for current governments, so who am I to stop him?”

Jago clenched his fist in anger at his master, he was nearly angry enough to hit him, “What of the thousands dying every day!? Do they mean nothing to you!?”

“I’ll say it again. This is not my war. It is yours.”

Jago kept pacing back and forth, his mind racing. He kept glancing at his master, his frustration growing. He couldn’t let this distract him. He only had one week to learn the Shin Kyō.

“One thing you should know,” Roken stopped Jago, “Edaj has power that is similar to my own. If you fail, know that this is the power that awaits your country.”

Jago stopped dead in his tracks. A chill ran through his body. He didn’t even know that there could be anyone with power similar to Roken’s.

“What could I possibly do against that kind of power?” Jago demanded, “You saw how the trial went. I can barely touch you.”

“Train,” is all that Roken responded with, “learn the Shin Kyō. With that, you’ll have enough power to beat him.”

Jago sighed. There wasn’t much else he could do. Complaining wasn’t getting him anywhere. Roken was just too obstinate.

“Then,” he said, dropping into the same stance Roken did when doing the Shin Kyō, “let’s get started.”

Roken grinned, “Right.”

Chapter 18

*They fought like the beasts
that they formed, the
majestic dragon on one
side, the terrible tiger on
the other.*

- Uvato Sren: Corvan Officer

Jago sat down on a log next to Tyrn, exhausted. Three days had passed since he had been shown the final secrets of the Mugen Shinzo Ken. He was no closer to learning on how to avoid Sen. His master had been drilling Jago through the various forms over and over, he had had hardly any time to think about it. Tyrn wasn't allowed to watch, but she supported Jago everywhere she could.

"How goes it?" Tyrn asked Jago, holding up a water bottle for him.

He took it graciously, drinking some while pouring the rest on his face.

"I'm doing the forms right, I just haven't figured out how to do what my master requires yet?"

"That's the thing that's required for you to do your technique, right?"

Jago nodded, "Yeah. Sorry, I really can't talk about it."

Tyrn shrugged, "Is there any hint that you could give out that I maybe could help you out with?"

Jago grinned, "I don't think so. I wish I could, but I can't." He took a swig of his water, "It's something simple too, I just know it."

Tyrn thought for a moment, trying to come up with advice, “Whenever I get stuck on a problem, I like to go back to the basics of what I know. From there, I can at least figure out what I’m missing, if not know how to do it.”

Jago’s eyes opened wide as he realized something. He hugged Tyrn with one arm and got up, “You’re right!”

Tyrn looked up in surprise, “I am?”

“Of course,” he said, his grin widening into a smile, “How could I have been so stupid? I’ve got to go.”

Tyrn watched in confusion as Jago ran back to Roken’s mansion. *Glad I could help*, she thought as she got up to follow him.

Jago searched through the library Roken had, looking for a specific book.

“Aha,” he exclaimed as he pulled the book he was looking for from the shelf.

It was an ancient book, well preserved, and written in animal skin. The cover was tattered, reading, *The Laws and Rules of the Mugen Shinzo Ken*. He opened the book near the front, looking for what he was seeking. He opened up to a chapter titled, *The Laws of Using Ti*. There he searched the page for the third law, Sen.

His eyes carefully studied the words. *Sen: User Transference. Of all the laws that govern Ti, Sen is the most dangerous. To use Ti, a medium through which the energy must flow must be presented. This medium, which is called Ro, must be able to use Ti itself. The Sōn, or loss of Ti, must come from the medium.*

In the Mugen Shinzo Ken, the Ro is the user of Ti, who must take

care not to destroy themselves from Sōn loss. However, if done carefully, other sources may be used for Ro in place of the user. This is known as Kyō, and is used in using Ti with multiple people. In the early days of the Mugen Shinzo Ken, several pupils would offer themselves as Ro to help their master do incredible feats in times of war.

Jago read through the rule several times, *this can't be all*. He looked through the large book for any additional mentions of Kyō, hoping for some clarification. There was only a short definition in the appendix.

Kyō: Strength - The process by which an individual offers themselves as Ro for someone else. Dangerous for the offerer. This process greatly enhances the user's abilities.

Jago was beginning to understand. Contrary to what he had been taught, the user of Ti does not have to be the medium by which Sen is taken. If there were multiple people around, one could use them to avoid Sen. But this didn't answer his question. After all, his master had not used him as Ro when performing the Shin Kyō.

This is part of the answer, Jago thought, but not all of it. There's something I'm missing still. Shin Kyō. It literally translate to Divine Strength or Godly Strength. If Kyō is supposed to be the same meaning that's in here, then I have to use something as Ro, but what? The third rule clearly states that the medium must be able to use Ti.

Jago got up and reshelved the book. Tyrn was standing in the doorway, watching him. He sighed. It wasn't going to be as easy as he thought it was.

"Any luck?" she asked, worry flickering in her eyes.

Jago shook his head, "Not really. I know part of the answer, but that still doesn't help me solve my problem."

She closed the distance between them, grabbing his hands, “I’m sure you’ll figure it out, Jago. You still have four days left. I mean, you were able to pass the trial in the much time.”

Jago looked into her worried eyes and smiled. It was nice to have someone care about him.

“Thanks Tyrn. I appreciate the thought.” He let go of her hands and walked out of the mansion, “I’m going to the mountain top to meditate. If I can find my answer, it’ll be there.”

Tyrn let him go, she knew she could do nothing else to help. She felt so helpless there. She hadn’t been much help to Jago. She leaned back against a wall, her eyes looking to where Jago had left her standing there.

On top of the mountain, Jago surrounded himself in Ti. He knew that it was useless, but it helped him think. He sat for hours, trying to think of what he’d been missing. Slowly, morning came up over the mountains and another day had passed.

Roken saw Jago descend from the mountain top, his brow furrowed in worry. He knew that Jago still hadn’t found the answer that he was looking for. Perhaps it was too soon to test Jago; he had little signs of progress. However, he knew that Jago couldn’t afford the time it typically took to learn Shin Kyō. If he told him how to do it, it would defeat the purpose of learning it in the first place. No, he would wait and pray to see if Jago would come up with the answer in time, he had no choice.

Lynn surveyed his army before him. He paced the ground back and forth in frustration. His spies had told them Jago had fled out of the

country. No one was left to defend Irati against him. His father told him to pursue their advantage at once, but Lynn hesitated. What would be the point of their win if Jago wasn't there? He knew his father wanted to conquer the world, but that victory would be tainted if they could not beat Jago in fair battle. And from what his spies told him, Jago left to get more powerful. His blood boiled with excitement for that. He didn't want to throw all of that away just because his father told him so.

An officer approached him and kneeled, "Sir. The King has ordered us to attack the Iratians, what would you have us do?"

Lynn thought about his father, how much he hated him. He looked at the officer with disdain, he was a bootlicker to his father. He hated people like that, where was his pride as a warrior?

"Corvaks," Lynn commanded, "We shall wait. If my dear father says otherwise, then he can come down himself to tell me."

Corvaks head shot up in surprise, no one defied the king. He was about to raise his protest before he saw Lynn's eyes. They were not calm, they were filled with rage. Had he spoken, he most certainly would have been killed. He dropped his gaze.

"Yes sir," was all he could reply.

Lynn looked at the snivelling coward, his disdain for him growing. No one knew what it meant to be a warrior anymore. These cowards did what they were told, regardless of their honor.

No one has the courage defy my father! They're all spineless! I won't listen to him this time. I must defeat Jago once in for all, no more tricks. I'll deal with my father if I've beaten him.

Lynn turned his back away from his army, his heart still empty.

Chapter 19

*The dragon soared above
us, surpassing the majesty
of the dragon. His prey
had been caught; he had
won.*

- Ben Draks: Iratian Warrant Officer

The week had passed. An early morning chill passed over the mountain top. The two warriors stood against each other, their presence unyielding.

Jago faced the man who was like a father to him, a man whose fists meant certain death. He clenched his fists in frustration. Despite spending all week contemplating the secret behind avoiding Sen, the secret still eluded him. The Shin Kyō was still as far away from him as ever before. He knew the forms, he knew the techniques, but the power escaped him like a sieve.

Roken Jiryuku faced the man who was just a boy a few weeks ago. He had made tremendous progress, more than he had seen anyone make at one time before. His eyes were as bright as fire, no matter what the outcome, he had to accept it, even if it resulted in Jago's death.

Tyrn sat on a log near the mansion, her eyes cast to where the two men had gone. She couldn't be there to witness it. Jago's eyes had been dejected that morning, worried. Her stomach twisted up, flipping over and over again. Despite all of the hard work that Jago had done, he could still fail. She looked up at the sky, praying for Jago's success. It was all she could do.

Roken dropped his cape off of his shoulders, hitting the muddy

ground with a large thud. Jago's eyes narrowed; he had never seen his master fight without his cape. It was weighted. He wasn't going to hold anything back. Roken's eyes pierced through Jago's. He stood, his presence emanating the killing intent.

"You've been lost these past few years," he told Jago. "You've been hurt beyond that which most can't comprehend."

Roken dropped into the Shin Kyō position. His body started to glow white, the sticks and pebbles around him rising in the air. Jago could feel the intense pressure that was caused by his master; it dwarfed the power that Jago had seen him use before. The air was so thick, it could have been cut.

"You've seen so much and lost that which is most dear," Roken stated, his voice booming across the top of the mountain, "And despite all of that, you've overcome it. You've made more progress here during these past few weeks than I could have possibly dreamed for you."

The air around Roken started to electrify, sparks forming around him, disintegrating the small pebbles floating in the air. Jago started to sweat, his body shaking.

"However, if you fail to succeed here, then I can promise you that one day you will end up to be what you fear most, twisted and demented. As your master, I can't allow that to happen."

Roken hesitated, "That is why if you fail to master the secret technique right now, not only will your journey to stop Edaj will end, but so will your life."

Jago gulped. Roken's power was overwhelming. He didn't know how he could face it. *Am I afraid of Roken Jiryuku? Am I afraid of the surety of death that he brings? I've faced death more times than I can*

count, so why? Why am I afraid?

Roken Jiryuku took a step forward, the ground cracking beneath him, his body brimming with light.

Jago steeled himself, *I cannot fear!* He thought about his history with Lynn, how he would have thrown his life away to stop him. He steeled his heart, he wasn't like that anymore. He had something he wanted to protect, someone he wanted to protect. *They're all relying on me*, Jago thought as he pushed himself forward.

Roku vanished in a column of light towards Jago, "You fool! Have you learned nothing!?"

Jago rushed forward, screaming. He hadn't bothered to even try to do the forms. He knew that he was going to die. As he was screaming, time slowed down to a stop. The area around him turned black, he could only see his master and himself. His life flashed before his eyes, each memory lasting for both an eternity, and for less than a moment. He remembered his brother Ian, when they were fishing when he was nine. The sun shone brightly in a gentle breeze by the lake near their house.

"You know Jago," Ian said smiling, "I wish everyday could be like this."

Jago smiled back at his brother, they were lying in the grass, waiting for the fish to bite. It was a perfect day, where everything in the world just seemed right.

"As long as I have you around, I don't need any other friend," Ian said laughing.

Suddenly, Jago's mind flashed forward to where Tyrn and himself were sitting on top of his hovercycle in the rain.

“You know Jago,” Tyrn said, looking into his eyes, her own light with love and care, “it’s not just me who is praying for you to succeed. Seth, Jaled, Ben, all of them care about you. And whatever problems you may be facing, we are here for you, no matter what.”

A voice appeared in Jago’s mind, his master’s, “Remember Jago. If you fail in your mission, it’s not just your life that you lose. That woman you love, your comrades, the people in your country, all of them will die if you do. So cling to them, they are something that is worth protecting, something that is more than yourself.”

Jago’s eyes opened wide, *something more than just myself. I understand*. He didn’t have to bear the burden alone, the whole world was helping him. They were part of life too, an extension of himself. Time started again, he was still screaming. Power flooded into Jago’s body, power beyond more than any one man could achieve, surrounding him with the same white light as his master’s. Jago dropped into the position for the Tetsu Ryu Ken, a silver dragon surrounding him.

Jago threw the dragon from his fist, his master doing so at the same time. They clashed in the air, surrounding the area with silver light. They wrapped around each other as they spiraled upwards, away from the both of them. They exploded above them, deafening everything around them. Jago and Roken passed each other, and turned to face each other once again.

Jago wrapped his fists and feet with Sei, and his hands with Kan and Tō. He felt the speed of sound break as he propelled himself at his master. Blow for blow their fists met, each impact blowing the air away from them, sparks flying from their hands. As the 10,000th punch collided with each other, both were pushed back a hundred meters, their bodies flipping in the air.

They landed simultaneously on their feet, not a step behind the other. They clapped their hands and moved their arms in a circle, their hands forming a circle above their stomach. Electric blue plasma formed in their hands as they thrust their hands forward, forming a triangle.

The beam shot out from both of their hands, each fifty meters wide. They collided in the space between them, incinerating everything in their path. The landscape erupted in light, the nearby trees and landscape completely incinerating. The light engulfed the land, encompassing the entire mountain top that they were on. The clouds parted from the force of the explosion, and the very top of the mountain disintegrated. Smoke surrounded the area. As the smoke cleared, the only thing left floating were the two men.

They slowly descended into the crater that they created. As they descended, Roken looked at Jago, his eyes bright with pride.

“Yes, Jago. That is correct. You don’t have to bear the burden alone anymore. The final secret of the Mugen Shinzo Ken, the Shin Kyō, shares this burden with the people around you. The very earth becomes your medium. No longer do you have to be burdened with saving the world. This power, which has been passed down for over a thousand years, comes from everyone. The Divine Strength, is everyone here on Earth, for they are an extension of yourself.”

They landed inside the crater, its radius vast. Jago looked around in wonder, he had done it. He felt a great burden lift off of his shoulders; he no longer had to fear anything.

“You are now a master of the Mugen Shinzo Ken,” Roken declared, “and no longer have to fear about Edaj being able to beat you. You are

on even grounds with him now.”

Jago looked at his fist in wonder and excitement; he had never felt so much power before. Any doubt he had in his mind was now gone. He knew longer thought that he could win; He knew that he would win.

Roken started to fly back towards the mansion; Jago followed him. Tyrn watched in amazement as they descended near her.

“You did it!” Tyrn shouted for joy as Jago landed in front of her, pulling him into a hug.

Jago smiled as he hugged her back, “Yes. I really did it.”

Roken went inside his house and returned wearing a gilded crimson cape. In his hands he held another one. He handed it to Jago. Jago’s eyes opened wide in surprise. It weighed at least 300 kilograms. Now he knew why his master was so bulky.

“Where this at all times if you can,” Roken instructed, “It’ll help develop powers for your attacks. You shouldn’t rely heavily on the Shin Kyō, it has a major drawback.”

“What?” Jago asked, surprised.

“As you saw for yourself, the amount of power that flows through your body when you use the Shin Kyō is immense. Your body has problems coping with that much power. If you continue to use it unchecked, you’ll destroy your body and will be swept into your attack. You should only use it for short bursts, like we did back there.”

Jago nodded, understanding, “Right, I’ll make sure to take care. Thank you Master, for everything.”

He glanced over to Tyrn, “It’s time for us to return, Tyrn.”

“Where do you think you’re going?” Roken asked them, “You’ve just performed the techniques once. I’m not letting you leave without at least another week of training.”

Jago took a step back, he was not expecting to have to train further, “Do I have to?”

“Listen, Jago. You need as much practice as you can get. You don’t want to go out to the battlefield only half as prepared as you can be.”

Jago glanced at Tyrn, waiting for her input. She just shrugged.

Jago shrugged in return, “Okay. I guess I’ll be here for a little while yet.”

Roken placed his hand on Jago’s shoulder, “Excellent. Let’s get back to work.”

Chapter 20

*The battle had begun, the
opening had started.
Neither side could have
predicted the horrors that
would unfold in the
following days.*

- Light

The week went by quickly. Jago trained hard every day to perfect his technique. Shin Kyō came to him easily now, it was almost like breathing. As the last day came, Jago and Tyrn were saying goodbye to his master. The sun had just broken through the night. The mountain was covered in morning light.

“You’ve improved so much, Jago” Roken said with an iota of pride, “You are no longer the boy you were when you came here. You’re your own master now.”

Jago hugged the cape around his shoulders, he was still getting used to the weight, “Thank you Master, I really appreciate all you’ve done for me. You’ve been looking out for me since the very beginning. I will always remember and keep the Mugen Shinzo Ken with me.”

Roken nodded, “Go, and fight for your dream. Grasp it with both hands and don’t let go. You’ll be sure to beat Edaj that way.”

“I’ll come to visit you again when all of this is over,” Jago stated saluting to his master, “Then I’ll show you my dreams realized.”

“We should mark this farewell,” Roken said, “Come. Let’s show Miss Ridner how we say goodbye.”

Jago nodded and backed away from his master. Tyrn watched from the sidelines, her eyes gazed with anticipation. They clapped their hands together, their bodies surrounded with light. They took a step towards each other, the sound barrier breaking beneath their feet. Their fists collided in midair.

“The school of the Mugen Shinzo Ken!” Roken Jiryuku shouted, their fists colliding with each punch that they threw.

“The Waves of Separation!” Jago replied, returning each punch that his master dished out.

“Seishin!” Roken roared, pulling his hands back, a fiery blue dragon swirled around his body, roaring loudly.

“Karada!” Jago bellowed, bringing his hands back like his master, a flaming red dragon encircling him, its roar just as loud.

They brought both hands out towards each other, their fists colliding in mid-air, their dragons swirled around them in a pillar of fire. The air around them was pushed back, powerful gusts of wind blew over the mountain top.

“Tamashi to Kokoro!!!” They shouted in unison.

The mountain erupted in light. Their dragons soared high in the air, above the clouds.

“Through our hearts our fists shall grasp eternity!” They finished, lightning shooting out of their hands into the ground below.

Tyrn looked in awe. Jago had changed; he seemed more confident, more sure of himself. His face was wide with a smile. Roken was smiling too.

“Go,” he commanded, “and let your fist bring honor to the Mugen

Shinzo Ken.”

“I will Master,” Jago bowed.

He turned to Tyrn, “It’s time. Let’s go.”

Tyrn bowed to Roken, “Thank you for all you’ve done for him.”

Roken grinned, “It’s up for you to take care of him now. Don’t let him give you grief, he can be quite a handful at times.”

She waved goodbye, “I’ll make sure he stays well behaved. Farewell!”

Roken waved them goodbye. It had been quite a while since he was so satisfied with a pupil. *Perhaps you can end this war once and for all.* He sat down on the log near his mansion. *Maybe you’ll be able to fulfill Light’s mission that he gave me all those years ago.*

Chapter 21

*There was no question, it
was as black as ice, just
like they said it was. I
could hear his laughter,
even though I was a
hundred meters away.*

- Kopan Nyrwl: Iratian Civilian

Brigadier General Sunah Tomath sat at his desk, reviewing the progress of the ongoing battles. It wasn't going too well for them. In the past few weeks, the Corvans had pushed back their lead that they had gained from Jago's victory. Fortunately, Lynn had remained absent from battle. Had he attacked at any time, they would have been doomed.

He looked at his watch, not really caring about the time. What worried him was how long Jago had been gone. He knew that he had gone to train, but it had almost been four weeks. People were beginning to speak. He had kept Jago's absence secret from everybody except those who absolutely needed to know. He wouldn't be able to keep up the charade for very much longer, too many people realized he was missing at the base.

He continued going through the paperwork. He reviewed a letter from the Emperor, who praised them for their success in battle. Tomath tossed it aside. The Emperor was just a puppet to his advisors, they were the ones who truly ran the country. What's worse is that they regularly lied to him about the status of the war, telling him that they were only days away from winning the war. Tomath knew differently. The war was bound to last a few more years at the very earliest. Corva and Irati were just too even in terms of combat. Neither side was

showing any signs of dropping out any time soon.

He sighed and leaned back in his chair. This war was making an old man out of him. His hair was mostly gray now, the brown it was beforehand mostly gone. His hands ached with pains of arthritis, his vision had started to dim. He was no longer the great warrior he had been. He looked wistfully out his window, remembering the time before the war.

His pondering was interrupted when Colonel Hughes burst through his door, gasping for breath. "He's returned! Jago's finished his training! He's on his way here now!"

Tomath turned to face the Colonel, "That's excellent news. Do you think he's any stronger?"

Colonel Hughes nodded, "He must be, or else he wouldn't have returned. I haven't seen him myself yet. I just heard from Major Prida who just phoned me telling me she just met him."

General Tomath's eyes opened wide in surprise, "You mean he's already inside the building?!"

"Yes, and he'll be here any second."

General Tomath rested his chin on his fists, "How did he get all the way here unnoticed?"

Hughes shook his head, "I don't know, but Laura said he's changed."

Tomath narrowed his eyes, "In what way?"

"She didn't tell me."

They both went silent as Jago walked into the door, with Tyrn

behind him. General Tomath looked into Jago's eyes, they were different, lighter. His entire persona radiated strength. He wore a cape over his uniform, crimson, gilded with gold trimming. It suited him well, and it matched with the Iratian Uniform he was wearing underneath.

He spoke, his voice quiet but powerful, "General, I have returned."

Colonel Hughes and General Tomath stood in awe of him. He had such a commanding presence, one of both majesty and grandeur. His body had a faint glow around him, and the air was electrifying. General Tomath looked at Colonel Hughes; he had succeeded.

"Excellent," Tomath replied, "Are you ready to take on Lynn?"

Jago raised his fist in front of him, looking General Tomath in the eyes, "Not only am I going to stop Lynn, but I'm going to end this war once and for all." His voice radiated confidence.

"Lynn hasn't been seen since you last fought him," General Tomath said looking for Jago's reaction, "What will you do about it?"

Jago smirked, "Lynn is a secondary objective. My main focus is ending this war. I'd like to get back to the battlefield as soon as possible."

General Tomath looked at him in surprise. *He has changed*, he thought, *I would've never thought he'd ever put Lynn out of his mind first.*

Roy looked eagerly at Jago, "Do you think you can beat him Jago?"

Jago glanced at Colonel Hughes, "By the end of my first week training, I was ten times stronger than I was when facing Lynn."

Colonel Hughes saw the seriousness in Jago's eyes. He was telling

the truth.

“I’m strong enough now to take on the Ebony Tiger,” Jago told them, “He’s my real enemy. If we can defeat him, we’ll win the war.”

Tomath thought for a moment, spinning in his chair, “Edaj is guarded well in his Emerald Fortress. Do you really think that you could get past his defenses to fight him?”

Jago nodded, “My only concern is with the Ebony Tiger himself. He’s stronger than his entire army’s strength combined.”

“Are you sure you’re ready to back out there?” Tomath asked for verification.

“I’d like to get to the front lines as soon as possible.”

Tomath turned in his chair to face Colonel Hughes, “Well Roy, what do you think?”

Roy Hughes studied Jago for a moment, “I think we better do as he asks. I honestly think he can end this war now.”

“Well then Jago,” General Tomath said, turning back to Jago, “How can we help?”

“I just need a single dropship,” Jago explained, “One that can fit twelve units.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard to gather, anything else?”

Jago shook his head, “That’s all I’ll need.” He saluted and then turned his back to the General and started walking away, “I’ll be in the bay, getting ready.”

“Right. It should only take a few minutes to get ready,” Tomath

explained.

Jago waved his hand in the air, “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Tyrn saluted both the Colonel and the General and then walked out after Jago.

“Do you think we’ll be okay with just the Company?” she asked him. “It wouldn’t hurt to have some backup.”

Jago shook his head, “It’s not needed.” He smiled, “Besides, I’ll have backup. I’ll have the eleven people I trust most in this army besides me.”

Tyrn smiled back nervously, “That’s great and all, but you’re asking us to take on an entire army by ourselves.”

Jago disagreed, “No. I’m taking on the army. You’re just helping me.”

“Are you sure you’re strong enough?”

Jago nodded, “Most certainly. Edaj has played this war as a game for too long. I’m just going to put an end to it.”

“What if Lynn comes out? Are you ready to face him?”

Jago clenched his hands, his eyes determined, “Yes, I am.”

He would no longer cower in fear at Lynn; he would face him head on and prove the power of a true master of the Mugen Shinzo Ken.

Tyrn stopped walking, forcing Jago to stop as well. He turned to face her.

“What?” he asked, wondering why they stopped.

“It’s just that I’ve seen you make so much progress in the last few

weeks. It's hard to believe that all of this is finally going to end."

Jago grinned, "I know. I can hardly wait."

Tyrn stared into his eyes, a little worried, "That's not what I mean. It's just that I've been doing this for so long now, I don't know what I'll do once this is over."

Jago grabbed her hands, "We'll worry about that once we get there."

Tyrn looked away, a little disheartened, "I always helped you out, even during the toughest of times. Now it hardly seems as if you need me at all anymore."

Jago gently grabbed her face to make her look at him, "Don't say that. The only reason I've been able to make it this far is because of you. And no matter what happens, we'll face it together."

Tyrn pushed herself close to him, acting instinctively. She pressed her lips against his, her desire urgent. Jago opened his eyes in surprise, before kissing her back. When they finally broke their kiss, he held her in his arms, smiling.

"What was that for?" he asked her.

She smiled back, "I might not have another opportunity to thank you before the battle. I really needed that."

Jago held her hand, hurrying over to the bay, "Come on, let's get over to the Bay."

She held his hand tightly in return. Her distraught was gone. She knew Jago could win; he was so much stronger than before. And not just physically, but emotionally and mentally as well. Jago pressed a button near his wrist as he entered Leviathan Bay.

“All officers of Company Ka Shin Ko, report to the Leviathan Bay immediately,” He commanded as he spoke into the device, “This is Captain Kale. I repeat, all officers of Company Ka Shin Ko, report to the Leviathan Bay immediately.”

He approached the Axial, Riza was busy buffing it. She smiled and waved when she saw him.

“Jago!” she shouted, “It’s been awhile since I’ve seen you.”

Jago waved back, “Shortstuff. How goes it?”

Riza grinned and pointed back towards the Axial, “I managed to get the Alpha Gear to operate on command. It should be much easier to use it the next time you fight.”

Jago placed his hand on the Axial, “Really? That’s amazing.”

Riza placed her hands behind her head and whistled, “Yeah, I know. I’m pretty awesome.”

She looked at Jago more closely, “You’ve changed. What’s with the cape?”

Jago flourished it in front of it, grinning, “This is the mark of a master of Mugen Shinzo Ken.”

Riza felt the fabric, admiring the handiwork, “Cool, can I see it?”

Jago laughed, “It might be a little heavy for you. It weighs over 300 kilos.”

“300 kilos!” Tyrn shouted, stunned, “How can you even stand?!”

Jago shrugged, “Training and such.”

Tyrn grabbed Jago’s shoulder, “I’m going to get into the Royal,

okay?”

Jago held her hand, looking into her eyes, “Right. Good luck.”

Tyrn left Jago standing there with Riza, hurrying to her Leviathan.

“Any other upgrades I should know about?” Jago asked, turning back to Riza.

“Not really,” Riza replied, “But there has been a software update.”

“What kind?”

Riza pointed to the vizor, “The GUI’s been slightly changed. It shouldn’t be a big deal.”

Jago nodded, “Thanks for letting me know. HUD changes can be disorienting.”

Riza shook her head, “It’s not the HUD that was changed. Some voice commands have been altered.”

“Really?” Jago was shocked. Voice commands helped a lot during battle. If that was changed, it could affect his performance. “What was changed?”

“Nothing much. You’ll see the differences on your HUD in the bottom lefthand corner. We’ve just made it easier to do commands by adding in acronyms.”

“That’s nice.” Jago responded as he got inside the Axial.

The system booted up smoothly. Like she said, he saw the new voice commands pop up on his screen.

“Okay, run sys dog,” Jago commanded to the Axial, checking some of the new voice commands.

“Running system diagnostics,” the Axial computer responded.

“Cool,” Jago said as parts of the Axial moved and transformed to do diagnostics.

“All systems online. Running at full capacity.”

Jago tested his hand, it moved fluidly. He punched out in a test and then did a roundhouse kick.

“Excellent. It seems in better shape than ever before,” he told Riza, while jumping up and down, testing the mobility.

Riza grinned, “I do my best, and my best is the best. Are you planning on running some tests right now?”

Jago shook his head, “No. I’m heading out to the war front as soon as possible.”

Riza’s eyes opened wide in shock, “What? You just got here!”

Jago stood bold, his body radiating victory, “This war has gone on long enough. I’m ending it now. The rest of the Company should arrive shortly.”

“You can’t take the whole army on by yourself! You’re going to get yourself killed!” Tyrr argued.

“No. Now more than ever I’m sure that I can do this,” Jago countered, “I’m tired of all the death around me. I’m ending it right now. No more waiting on Lynn to come out.”

Riza was about to argue further but then she truly saw Jago. He wasn’t filled with hate or loathing like he was before; he was confident.

The rest of the Company trickled in and stood before Jago, wondering why they had been brought there. They were excited to see

him again, but also nervous. He hadn't exactly been stable when they had left.

Jago addressed them, "Forgive me for the past few weeks, I've been training with my master. Now I'm a true master of the Mugen Shinzo Ken. Our mission today is simple. We're going to the front lines to help stop this war. I've requested that only you eleven come with me. We may be outnumbered, but I believe in our strength."

The anxiety in the Company grew. Taking on an entire army alone was ludicrous, a suicide mission. They may have been strong, but Jago was just plain crazy to trust them so much.

"Jago, we've done some crazy things before, but taking on the entire army?" Ilel voiced, more than a little concerned and skeptical, "It's not just a bad idea. It's crazy. Even with my commandos, taking on the front lines is a difficult task in and of itself."

"Right. Taking only us eleven out there is just guaranteeing our death," Orlo agreed.

Seth looked at everyone in excitement and perhaps a little crazed, "I like the idea. I've been dying to see some combat. They're no match for me."

Ceri folded her arms and harrumphed, "Listen, Jago. I like living too much to die over one of your stupid ideas!"

"Even the Eagle, who is king over all birds, can be taken down by the wind," Ben inputted.

Mishti punched Ben on the arm, "Oh, please! Can't you speak normally! You always sound like you're reciting a proverb!"

"HEY!" Jago shouted over their arguing, "THAT'S ENOUGH!"

Everyone went silent at once.

“Now I know that this doesn’t seem ideal for you, but I need you to trust me. I’m not going to let you get killed. When have I ever let any of you down?”

Everyone was ashamed. For as much carelessness that Jago was known for, he always kept his men safe. The only time he had ever had casualties was when he was facing Lynn.

“I want you all to meet me outside in ten minutes, suited up,” Jago explained, “A dropship is being sent to us to take us to the front lines.”

“Before we break,” Jaled interrupted, “tell me Jago. How sure are you that you can win?”

Out of everyone there, Jaled was the most experienced. He had seen more war than anyone else. He could hear something in Jago’s voice that the others could not, surety. Jago wasn’t just hoping that he could win any more.

“There’s not a question of whether we can win anymore,” Jago told him honestly, “The only man who will give us trouble is Edaj Forsigth, the king of Corva.”

Jaled addressed everyone else, “Well I’m convinced. I’ll see you all shortly.”

Everyone else stared after Jaled, surprised. Slowly, everyone broke off to get inside their Leviathans. Jago watched after them. *Honestly, if I was in their shoes, I probably would’ve argued more.* He grinned, *I guess I can really rely on them after all.*

Jago went to the Axial’s hatch and crouched.

“Go!” he commanded as it opened, and he flew through the air

above him.

He did his standard sets of movements before landing on the ground, satisfied. He was ready. Tyrn flew in next to him.

“Are you ready?” he asked her.

She sighed, “As ready as I’ll ever be, I guess.” She clapped her hands, “I believe we can actually do it.”

Jago nodded, “Of course. I would never have done this unless I was sure that I could succeed.”

One by one, the Company dropped in. Several were still uneasy about going out into the battlefield.

“Show us,” Shado commanded, “Prove that you can beat Lynn and take on the entire army.”

Jago looked and Tyrn and shrugged. It couldn’t hurt. He dropped into the Shin Kyō, his body glowing white. The Company stared in awe as they could feel the pressure around them increasing. The area around them started to darken as the light around Jago grew stronger. Jago’s body was energized with power, he could feel his body trembling with excitement. He concentrated Kan around his body and swept his arms around in a circle, finishing with his hands forming a circle above the pit of his stomach. He concentrated all of his Tō and Sei into his hands, draining every bit of power given to him in it. A plasma ball formed in his hands, larger than one he had ever created before. It grew in his hands to the size of his head, shooting of sparks everywhere. The Company was stunned, they could feel the intensity in the air. It made their HUDs go crazy in their Leviathans. It could pick up the amount of power Jago was concentrating.

Jago could feel the weight of the plasma ball as he pushed his hands

into the air, forming a triangle. The beam erupted from his hands, at least seventy meters wide. The force of it pushed Jago into the ground and pushed everyone else back. The beam rocketed through the air, disintegrating anything it touched. Jago slowly descended his hands as it traveled farther and farther, breaking through the atmosphere and reaching space. He looked at his Company, not tired at all.

“So,” he asked, “What do you think?”

Roso laughed, “I think the Corvans won’t know what hit them.”

The rest of the Company laughed with them, their unease gone. They all boomed with confidence, sure that they could take on the entire army.

The dropship came for them a few minutes later, picking them up to send them to the front lines.

Chapter 22

*I couldn't see what
happened, he moved so
fast. It was like he was a
god, or lightning itself,
striking each person with a
flash of light.*

- Plado Shone: Corvan Soldier

The dropship got closer and closer to the wastelands that was the battlefield. It was dark in there, with no inside lights to let them see out. The entire ride was quiet, with little conversation. The pilot glanced back at them.

"I can't go any further," he said, "We're high risk here on to be shot down. I have to land. You're still a few clicks out from the battle."

Jago nodded, he was expecting this, "Open the hatch, We'll fly out."

"Roger that Captain," he responded, pressing a button that opened up the floor beneath them. The twelve fell through the air, having done this countless times. At the last moment, everyone engaged their rockets and landed safely on the grass below. They slowly approached a trench where other friendly units were.

"Who's the commanding officer here?" Jago asked a nearby soldier, who was standing as a watch.

There seemed to be a temporary cease fire on the battlefield. The soldier saluted him, recognizing Jago at once.

"Colonel Kureo, sir," he replied, "You'll find him in a command tent a little south of here."

“Thank you soldier,” Jago saluted, “C’mon everyone. Colonel Kureo will gladly use our help.”

They followed Jago south down the trench. Colonel Ynel Kureo was issuing orders to soldiers. He wasn’t wearing a Leviathan. His face was hard, his head bald. He looked at Jago with gratitude, apparently the battle wasn’t going well.

Jago saluted him, “Captain Kale, reporting for duty. How can I help, Colonel?”

Kureo nodded at him, “At ease, soldier. General Tomath said you were coming. He told me that you could stop this battle for us.”

“I’ll see what I can do, sir.”

Kureo scratched his chin, a thin beard across his face, “Excellent. We’ve been in need of support. There’s been a temporary cease fire for now, but that’s bound to stop soon.”

“What happened?” Jago inquired.

Kureo sighed, “Oh, just the usual. Tending to the wounded and carrying off the dead. Last night was a nightmare for both parties.”

Jago nodded, understanding.

“I don’t know what abilities you have, Captain,” Kureo stated, “but Tomath has a lot of faith in you. You’re free to do whatever he assigned you to do.”

“Thank you,” Jago saluted and backed away, the Company following him. It was nice that General Tomath trusted him enough to give him free reign.

“I want you all to stay here right now,” Jago said, “I’m going to

check out the enemy.”

He flew out of the trench into the open battlefield. He covered the Axial in Kan, in case of enemy mortars. He flew a couple of kilometers to the west, where the enemy was. Below him, the Corvan soldiers pointed at him. Several high caliber rounds exploded near him, surrounding him in smoke. Machine guns and gattling guns pelted him, doing nothing. As the smoke cleared, the Corvans stared at him in horror.

Jago counted the enemy numbers quickly. As far as he could tell, there was about 20,000 of them on that battlefield. He grinned, it was fewer than he thought it would be. He descended onto the ground in front of him, right in front of their trench. Their fire didn't let up.

“I got this,” he told everyone through his comms, “This'll be no problem at all.”

He turned his back to the enemy, walking into the middle of the wasteland. The enemy ceased fire, wondering what he was doing. Jago clapped his hands, his body surrounded with white light. He vanished, a large crack following after him.

Suddenly he was in front of the enemy soldiers, his body crackling like electricity. The soldier in front of him couldn't even see Jago take his energy supply out of his Leviathan, it was so fast. The soldier collapsed on the ground, all of his systems broken. Jago vanished again, each time a loud boom following him. One by one, he picked his way through the soldiers, removing every power supply that he saw.

The back of the Corvan army watched in horror as a hundred soldiers dropped in a few seconds, more dropping every moment. Jago moved swiftly between each of them, crushing each power supply in his

hands. Since they were in trenches, they were easy pickings for Jago and not much of a threat.

The Corvans could only watch as Jago decimated their battalions, disappearing and reappearing like an apparition. He never had to look back once. After two minutes of disappearing and reappearing, Jago reappeared atop the wasteland. 5,000 Corvan Leviathans dropped at once, hitting the ground with a loud thud. The Corvan officers were terrified; they didn't know that that kind of power was even possible.

"Surrender now," Jago declared, "Or I'll destroy the rest of your battalions."

The officers were enraged; they were being beaten by one man.

"SOMEONE KILL HIM!" One of them shouted.

Jago was bombarded with all manner of fire, none of them affecting him. He took a step forward, the ground shaking beneath him.

"You've made your choice," he said, his voice booming, "You only have yourselves to blame."

He disappeared again, the sonic boom following him. The Corvan officers watched in shock as he appeared before them, grabbing their power cores in a flash before vanishing again. No one could stop his unmitigated power. Unit after unit, he went through, destroying all in his path. He spared no one, everyone fell before him.

The screams of the soldiers could be heard from the other side of the battlefield. The Iratian soldiers listened in anticipation. They had seen Jago stand against all of their firepower unscathed. He was no longer just their hero; he was a legend.

Jago moved faster, tearing through everyone. After ten minutes of

work he reappeared on the wasteland. The 15,000 remaining soldiers collapsed, their Leviathans in pieces. Jago calmly walked back to the Iratian trenches, the cheers from his fellow soldiers deafening. They jumped up and out to praise him. They had seen a miracle.

Jago ignored the people surrounding him and walked to the Company. Jaled looked at him in disgust and spit on the ground.

“You killed all of them?” he asked, “It takes a real messed up psychopath to do that.”

Jago shook his head, “Actually, I just removed their power cores. All of them are still alive.”

“Wait,” Colonel Kureo asked, “You mean to tell me you didn’t kill a single one of them?”

Jago shrugged, “There was no need. They’re defenseless now. Although, we should send men right away to prevent them from escaping. There’s about 20,000 of them.”

“You really are something else, boy,” Kureo whistled, “General Tomath was right about you. You can end this war.”

Jago nodded, “I have to move to the other battlefields now. I plan to destroy the Corvan army by the end of the day.”

Colonel Kureo could only nod back at him in response.

The Company started to cheer him as they got out of the trenches and back onto their dropship.

“People are going to talk about today for centuries,” Bors stated, “You’ll be a legend.”

“20,000 people in just a few minutes,” Ceri said awed, “That’s more

people than the city I grew up in.”

Roso hit Jago on the shoulder, “I still can’t believe you didn’t kill any of them. That’s more impressive than taking them down. You’re like a monster.”

They all kept clamoring up about him, each person praising him as they took off to their next location. He looked at Tyrn for relief; she just shrugged.

“Sorry we couldn’t help you out Jago.” she said apologetically.

Jago sighed, “Don’t worry about it. This is what I was expecting anyway. When Lynn comes out, I expect I’ll need all of your help.”

“Do you really think he’s going to show up?” Bors asked, “He’s known to disappear after winning his battles.”

Jago nodded, “I’m positive. There’s no way Edaj can let this slide. I wouldn’t be surprised if Lynn is on his way towards us right now.”

“Wait,” Mishti interjected, “Didn’t you take them all down at once practically? He might not even know the battle is over.”

“I doubt that he wouldn’t know it,” Jago disagreed, “It took me roughly fifteen minutes to take them all down. That’s more than enough time to send out a distress signal.”

He leaned back against the dropship wall, “Besides, I’m not too worried about it. He’ll come when he comes. In the meantime, let’s just do as much damage as we can.”

For the next few hours, the Company repeated the process of getting into the dropship, going to a new battlefield, and completely decimating the enemy. They had finished three battles in the span of two hours. Tyrn was worried that Jago might get tired, but he looked no different

from when they first started. She wondered what the final secret was that he learned. It seemed to give him unlimited endurance.

Jago knew his master warned him about prolonged Shin Kyō use, but he felt perfectly fine. The amount of energy he was using paled in comparison to using the three final attacks simultaneously. He had been shrouding his body in Kan, with Sei wrapped around his hands and feet to increase his speed and power. It had worked tremendously. He was more worried that his physical body would tire before he was overpowered from Ti. Everything was going exactly as he planned.

Lynn Forsigth reviewed his army, still refusing to go out to battle until Jago came back. They were right outside the capital of Corva, Jindel. The palace looked like pure crystal, and it gleamed with incandescent light everywhere. He was in one of the main towers, where the most of the reserve army was. He paced back and forth. He was sure that Jago would come for him right away when he was ready. He walked over to the communications department, who were all working on computers. An officer approached him, saluting.

“Sir,” he stated, “We’ve lost contact with the battalions at Mardel, Jon’s Point, and Kivel, all of which were front line battalions.”

“What do you mean?” he asked the man, “Have they been defeated.”

“We’re not sure sir,” the man replied, “All units on the field have stopped responding to our signals. Either our receptors have malfunctioned or they are all dead. Our technical staff are running diagnostics on the satellite right now for issues.”

Lynn’s eyes narrowed in suspense, “Show me your records. I need

to know when they went out.”

The officer showed Lynn to his desk, where the data for the each battalion on the field were displayed. Lynn noticed the time stamps next to each loss in signal. They were all within a few seconds of the previous unit. The largest gap was twenty minutes between units.

“This is not a technical problem,” Lynn told the officer, “Look at the times. Each one is slightly different than the others. Someone has systematically destroyed each unit.”

“Within such a short time period, sir?”

Lynn nodded, “Yes. I’ll have to report this to the king at once. He’ll need to know this. A third of the army has been wiped out in just a few short hours.”

Lynn backed out of the communications department, the officer saluting him. He walked several miles to the palace, his worry increasing with every step. *It has to be Jago, he thought. No other person could do so much damage in so little time. But what was his objective? He should have known that I wouldn’t be on the front lines. It seems like he’s just going to each battlefield and destroying all of our units. He’s going to quickly. He should’ve been exhausted after the first battlefield, but he’s conquered three.*

He walked into the throne room, where his father was sitting on his crystal throne. He looked nothing like his father. His father looked like a lion, with his blonde beard and long hair covering up most of his face. His eyes were golden, like the sun. He wore the symbol of a black tiger across his chest, signifying that he was the Ebony Tiger. He looked with disdain at his son, who approached him.

“My lord,” Lynn kneeled, “It has been brought to my attention that

Jago Kale has been destroying our armies the past few hours. He's been to three battlefields already and is most likely headed to his forth."

Edaj laughed with scorn at his son, "Not so much the honor bound warrior you said he was, is he?"

He held out his hand to Lynn, "Come here, my son."

Lynn approached his father, resentment in his eyes. Edaj grabbed his face.

"I told you this is what would happen. I knew that Jiryuku would get through to him," he lectured Lynn, his eyes desperate, like a rat trapped in a cage.

Lynn had never seen his father like that; he actually looked worried. Edaj punched Lynn in the face, hard. Lynn was sent reeling backwards.

"You fool!" Edaj shouted at Lynn, "Your honor has cost us our army!"

Lynn got up, the hatred in his eyes growing. He kneeled by his father again, "Forgive me, my lord."

Edaj regarded Lynn and spit on him. Lynn's fists started to tremble with rage.

"You're just a worthless brat, like your mother was," Edaj told him.

Lynn kept his face downcast, trying to hide the rage in his face, "Yes, my lord," he said through gritted teeth.

"Still, you are my son." Edaj lifted Lynn's face up with his foot. He looked into Lynn's eye. To him, Lynn was no more than a mongrel, a wild stray that he was forced to care for.

"I can forgive you of your insolence," Edaj said, "if you bring me

the head of this Jago Kale.”

Lynn narrowed his eyes, “Thank you for your generosity, my lord. Your compassion knows no bounds. I’m not worthy to be in your presence.”

Edaj stared through Lynn’s soul, depicting his every thought, “Lynn. If you fail to kill Kale and return here, then you will be disowned as my son. No son of mine would be so weak.”

He pointed out the door, “Go, and don’t fail me again.”

Lynn bowed, “Right away, my Lord.”

Lynn didn’t look at his father as he exited the palace. His rage abated the further he traveled away. If it wasn’t for the fact that his father had shown him how to use Ti, he wouldn’t have been able to be in his presence. As it was, he spit out the bile in his mouth. When the war was over, he would be the ruler of the world.

He walked back to where the rest of the army was, his blood boiling with anticipation. The time had come to face Jago one last time, in mortal combat. He could feel his emptiness eating away at him. He knew that he could cure it only by killing Jago as a worthy opponent. Everything else was just a distraction to that true purpose.

He approached a nearby guard, “Assemble the five Beasts,” he commanded, “I want them in front of me within the next few minutes.”

The guard saluted, “Yes sir.”

Lynn was left standing in his own thoughts. *Yes, we’re going to avoid any outside assistance, Jago. You won’t be able to rely on your precious Company this time.*

Five men approached Lynn, each of their faces covered. They were

all wearing black and each had an emerald animal on their chest.

“The time for us to crush Jago Kale has arrived,” he instructed them, “You’ll be coming with me to make sure he dies.”

They each bowed to him, saying nothing. They were perfect warriors, each constructed only with battle in mind. He didn’t know what their real names were, or where they came from. He always referred to them by the animal on their chest: Hawk, Scorpion, Bear, Shark, and Wolf. He knew that they weren’t as strong as Jago’s Company, but that mattered little to him. They were just there to distract the others from his fight with Jago. Once he killed Jago, he would kill the others.

“Let’s go,” he commanded as he left for the battlefield.

They followed suit after him. Lynn boiled with anticipation for the coming fight. Either he or Jago would die. There would be no other outcome.

*I had to kill him; I had no
other choice. With each
punch, I could feel my
heart beat again. I never
expected how strong he
had gotten.*

- Lynn Forsigh: Prince of Corva

Jago looked at the evening sky, the day was well spent. He had cleared six battlefields without a single casualty. He felt that it was an answer on how he could fight to his fullest without worrying about the state of his soul. His body had gotten sore throughout the day, so he used Ti to relieve the pain. He was as calm as he could ever be.

“There’s not that many battlefields left,” he told the Company and smiled, “The war is almost over. We’ve crippled the Corvan military. They stand no chance against us now.”

“We?” Seth said, “You mean you have. We’ve just sat around most the day. Honestly, I don’t know why you brought us out here at all.”

Jago closed his eyes, his smile still bright, “Lynn will be here soon enough. You’ll have your chance then.”

A voice broke through his comms, “Jago, I hear you’ve done really well out there.”

Jago answered his comms, “Is that you Lieutenant Gioke? I’m surprised to hear from you.”

“I never imagined that we would be in this position,” Don said, “I never thought you would actually do it.”

Jago laughed, “If I had been like the way I was before, I would agree with you. That man could never have done this.”

“Laura, the General, Colonel Hughes, they say you’ve changed. And based on what I’ve heard, I’ll agree. What happened while you were training?”

Jago remembered his training, his master, “You’ll just have to find out.”

“You seem so different, so calm. When I was told you went after the front lines before Lynn, I couldn’t believe it.”

Jago nodded, he remembered how hot blooded he was. Even he hard time with how much he changed. It was like he was in a cocoon, and he had finally achieved his final metamorphosis.

“Anyway,” Don said, “I’d just like to thank you. For everything. You’ve made ending this war from a dream, to a reality.”

“It’s not over yet,” Jago replied.

“I know,” Don agreed, “but it looks like it's finally within our grasp. For that, I can’t thank you enough.”

Jago was silent for a moment. For Don to actually thank him; it was absurd.

“No problem Don.”

“Now, as your commanding officer, I order you to send Lynn flying. Give him one from all of us.”

“I will,” Jago promised as he closed his comms.

He knew Lynn was on his way which is why they decided to stay at that battlefield. They held the advantage in every way possible. All of

the men from the several Iranian battalions stationed there would be there to help them. No longer was Lynn challenging Jago, Jago was challenging Lynn.

Jago looked at the Company, proud of what they had accomplished together. They had been through a lot together, witnessed several comrades' deaths, suffered many defeats at the hands of Lynn. They were more than just comrades, they were family.

"Listen," he told them, "Know that no matter what happens today, we'll all still be the Company."

They nodded. They understood. They didn't want to break their bonds after the war either. They were a close knit group, more so than most other soldiers.

Ilek laughed uncomfortably, "What brought that on Captain? You know we'll always still be us."

Jago grinned, "You misunderstand. I'm not worried about anyone dying. I just don't want us to drift apart. Even after this war is over, each one of you will still be part of the Company."

He held out his arm, "Bring out your hands," he commanded.

They formed a circle, each person contributing a hand to the center.

Jago looked at everyone, one by one, in their eyes and concentrated. The symbol for their Company the Ka Shin Ko glowed on their hands. Everyone's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Now," Jago declared, "Wherever you go, you'll always remember the Ka Shin Ko Company."

Everyone took their hands back, on the back of each of their hands, a brighter patch of skin appeared. It wasn't a tattoo or a brand, just a

brighter patch of skin with the Ka Shin Ko engraving.

“It’s part of your very being now. Nothing can ever change or remove it.”

Everyone started to thank Jago, a few of them, such as Ceri and Orlo, had tears in their eyes. They broke apart, each one admiring the symbol on their hands.

“No matter what happens next,” Tyrn said raising her fist, “We’ll always be together.”

Everyone raised their fist in the air in response. The air of camaraderie was strong.

Jago’s smile dropped. He could feel something approaching. He looked upwards and zoomed in with the Axial. Six Leviathans quickly approached them. Jago recognized the one leading immediately. *Lynn, It’s time to finish this.* Tyrn followed Jago’s gaze, concerned.

“He’s here!” she shouted to the others.

Suddenly, the Company formed their classic circle, preparing for the oncoming enemies. Lynn landed in front of Jago, more than a little surprised that he didn’t rush off to attack him. The air was still, as silent as everyone there.

Jago shot a glance to Tyrn, who nodded immediately. The five Leviathans he brought with him would be skilled. Each one had an animal symbol emblazoned on their Leviathans. They would have to take care of them. The Company split into groups of two, each targeting who their opponent would be. Shadow and Ben circled around the one with a hawk on his chest. Ilel and Orlo targeted the shark, Seth and Jaled the bear, Mishti and Roso the scorpion, and Ceri and Bors the wolf. Tyrn stayed next to Jago, not wanting to leave him. They all

briefly looked at each other and then the battle begun.

Lynn charged at Jago, his body emitting emerald flames. He was slow, Jago was prepared for him. He shrouded his feet in Sei and sprung forward at Lynn, blocking his first punch. Jago then pushed Lynn back with an open palm, sending him back ten meters. Lynn grunted in pain. Jago stood confidently before Lynn.

“If you think I’m the same person I was beforehand, you’re gravely mistaken,” Jago told him.

Lynn was getting excited, this is what he had wanted. His heart started to pound, his excitement electrifying. He could feel it, his emptiness fading away.

“Here I come!” he shouted as he propelled himself forward, punching at Jago.

Jago dodged his punch, which Lynn turned into a flaming roundhouse kick. Jago dodged that as well, dropping to the ground, shrouding his foot in both Sei and Tō, and kicked Lynn high into the air. Lynn started to spiral towards the ground, and he caught himself at the lost moment, firing his rockets.

Around them the others were fighting. The Hawk flew high into the air in his Leviathan, forcing Ben and Shado to go after him. Ben reached him first, narrowly dodging the phase sword that Hawk swung at him. Ben had anticipated this and had purposefully distracted him so that he wouldn’t see Shado’s attack. Shado was death itself. She moved her twin phase swords like ribbons, cutting everything in her path. The Hawk shot out a flash grenade right before she struck, blinding Shado, flying even higher into the sky.

He laughed at her as he looked down below. She was easy prey,

now. Suddenly, one of his rockets exploded, sending him careening. Ben followed him through the sky.

“Though the hawk may be a powerful hunter, nothing escapes the king of the birds,” Ben said as he flew behind him. He struck out with his fist forming a claw, completely destroying the Hawk Leviathan. The Hawk screamed in pain, he had several system shut downs.

How could one strike do so much damage?! he thought as he fell through the sky. The eagle had clipped his wings. Before he hit the ground, Shado appeared in front of him, her blood red Leviathan crying for a kill. The Hawk watched in horror as Shado struck out with her blades, unleashing dozens of slashes in just a few seconds. At first he thought that she missed, he didn’t feel anything. Then he erupted in a giant explosion.

Shado landed on the ground, sheathing both of her swords at once, “No one makes a fool out of me.”

Ben landed next to her, lamenting her violence, “The blade that thirsts for blood will never be satiated.”

Shado glanced in him in irritation, their part of the battle was over.

Meanwhile, Ilek and Orlo took on the Shark Leviathan, which was covered in razor sharp edges and spikes. The Shark rocketed towards them, spinning aggressively.

Those spikes are dangerous, Ilek thought as he narrowly dodged his attack. One of the edges grazed him, cutting a part of his Leviathan. *I don’t know what kind of metal that is, but it can cut through our suits easily.*

“Orlo,” he shouted, “Be careful! Every part of his body can cut us!”

Orlo nodded back, he wasn't a fighter typically, but he was good at observing enemy conditions. That's why he partnered up with Ilek, who was leader over commandos. He was relying on him to fight while he searched for a weakness.

The Shark rocketed at them again, completely immune to the bullet fire Ilek and Orlo fired at him. He headed straight for Orlo. Orlo tried to dodge, flying upwards at the last second. The Shark's plan had worked, he had baited Orlo on purpose, and he changed directions in mid air, straight towards him. A mortar hit the Shark in the back, pushing him away right before he was hit. The sharp edges of the Shark Leviathan tore through his, cutting him in his side. He grunted in pain.

The Shark redirected itself, back towards Orlo. Orlo could only watch in horror as it approached him. A powerful shell exploded around the Shark right before he was hit, sending him away from Orlo. Ilek dropped in right next to him.

"Are you okay?" he asked, concerned.

The Shark rocketed towards the both of them.

"I'm fine," Orlo responded, "I may have found a weakness in his armor."

Ilek fired another mortar at the Shark, sending him away from them temporarily.

"What is it?" he asked firing another shell, "I only have four of these left, and they just push him away."

"For his armor to be sharp enough to cut through ours he must have used a lot of carbon. While that would sharpen his blade," He explained, flying around to avoid the Shark, "it also makes his

Leviathan very brittle.”

“How would we break it then?” Ilek asked, firing another mortar.

“Extreme heat followed by incredible force. It’ll break under the pressure.”

Ilek nodded as the Shark came towards them again. Right before impact, Orlo released his rocket fluid at the shark, his arm getting clipped in the process. It laid limp, useless.

“That’s all I can do, Ilek,” he told him, “He must’ve popped my shoulder out of place. It’s up to you to finish him. All that fluid around his body should make him ignite. Fire your mortar, and he should pop like corn.”

Ilek aimed his mortar at the Shark. It was his last one. The Shark came straight at him. There would be no time to dodge. Ilek fired his last shell, and a giant fireball engulfed him and the shark as it exploded. The Shark Leviathan cracked and shattered, incinerating the pilot inside. As the smoke cleared, Ilek remained standing, a large spike impaling his left leg.

“Are you okay Ilek?” Orlo asked as he saw him grunt in pain.

“I’ll live,” he told him, “Thanks for your advice, it saved my life.”

“No problem,” Orlo replied, “I’m just glad to have helped.”

As they fought, Mishti and Roso took on the Scorpion Leviathan. It surrounded itself an electromagnetic field, pushing all of their attacks away.

“Those are some pretty awesome modifications you have there,” Mishti complimented him, “I’m going to enjoy adding them to my

collection.”

She shot her powerful emp from her wrist, surrounding the Scorpion in powerful electrical arcs. They didn’t get past his shield. Roso took a different approach, firing everything he had at the Scorpion at once. Missiles, grenades, bullets all rained down on the Scorpion but failed to hit. Smoke encompassed the land about them.

Suddenly, an electrical ball of energy shot forwards towards Mishti. She tried to avoid it but could not. Her Leviathan erupted in a shower of sparks.

“AHH!” she screamed, her body twitching involuntarily.

“Mishti!” Roso shouted, running towards her.

“You idiot!” she scolded him, “Behind you!”

Roso turned just as a ball of electricity hit him, barraging him with the same pain Mishti had.

The scorpion looked on his prey; he had mastered the perfect attack. By shrouding his body in an electromagnetic shield, he could prevent himself from being hit. And by turning his field into an electric ball, he could electrocute his enemies without them ever touching him. The Scorpion stayed his attack, he was studying his opponents. These were experienced soldiers, and he had no idea what they were capable of.

Mishti and Roso slowly regained control of their functions, both in excruciating pain.

“How do we beat this guy Mishti?” Roso asked her, standing up.

Mishti panted, her Leviathan barely responded to her commands, “He’s got an electromagnetic barrier around him. That means anything metal won’t be able to get past him. We need something more organic,

something carbon based.”

“Do we have any weapons that could do anything like that?”

Mishti nodded, “I have some plastic explosives used for remote detonation. Of course they require a blasting cap and a fuse, so it may be futile.”

“Why?” he asked her, pulling her up on his feet.

“If the electromagnetic field shorts out the blasting cap, it may just explode before reaching him,” she explained.

“Do we have any chances then?” he said carefully observing the Scorpion’s movements.

He was watching them, cautiously.

“This one seems the more cautious type,” he observed.

Mishti nodded at him, “You’re right. We’ll have to shoot the explosives at him at a high velocity. By the time it passes through his electromagnetic field, it’ll blow up right in his face.”

“We could always put it in one of my cannons,” Roso suggested, “That’ll be more than fast enough.”

Mishti shook her head, “That won’t work. The plastic ignites at high temperature and impact, which your cannon would classify as both.”

“Then what can we do?”

Mishti thought for a moment, “I’ve modified my right arm to be completely analog,” she told him, “It’s made out of carbon fiber and the rockets on it are pressure based. There’s nothing metallic in it at all. I could shot my arm forward at him, with the explosives on my hand.

That should give us a fighting chance.”

Roso shook his head, “He’ll see that coming.”

Mishti gritted her teeth, “That’s why you’re going to distract him.”

Roso nodded, he understood.

“Wait,” she commanded, “Before you think of sacrificing yourself, use these.”

Five drones shot from her shoulder, “These are designed to fire on any object I have targeted on my Leviathan. They should provide a proper distraction for you.”

“Thanks,” he said as he walked forwards to the Scorpion, the drones hovering above him.

They moved forward and started raining bullet fire on the Scorpion. Roso opened up all of his weapons, aiming a giant gatling gun at the Scorpion’s head.

“Try this on for size,” He taunted as the bullets bombarded the Scorpion.

The Scorpion held up his electromagnetic barrier, not daring to attack. He knew they were plotting something, but he couldn’t let down his barrier to attack or he would be obliterated.

Mishti aimed at the Scorpion, her arm still shaking from earlier. She slapped her arm, *C’mon*, she thought, *be still*. Her arm slowly steadied. She held the plastic explosives in her hand, ready to release. She pressed down on her palm three times in rapid succession, and the rocket in arms roared to life. Her arm slipped out her Leviathan, and it flew forward like a rocket.

The Scorpion saw the arm coming towards him and almost laughed. Those fools! The arm would never reach him; it was made of steel just like the rest of the Leviathan. His face slowly dropped into horror as he saw the arm pass through the barricade, the explosive igniting.

The explosion was contained, his electromagnetic shield still active. This built up the pressure of the explosion, and he died instantly. At last, the electromagnetic field deactivated, and his carcass dropped to the ground, smoking. Mishti and Roso approached him, Mishti looking for parts.

Across the wasteland, Ceri and Bors fought against the Wolf. He was exceptionally fast, and had steel claws that he slashed at them with. They were unable to shoot him down; he moved too fast. They had avoided his slashes by the skin of their teeth. Ceri was getting really frustrated with him. Bors moved like in a dance, his moves always exaggerated.

“He’s fast Ceri,” Bors said, his body constantly moving and posing.

He’s so weird, Ceri thought as she responded, “Yeah he is.”

“It seems our guns will be useless against him.”

Ceri nodded, she realized it too. They’d only beat him in hand-to-hand combat or swordplay.

“I’m mostly firearms based,” she told him, “I’m not equipped well for close range fighting.”

“I know,” Bors said flourishing his hand, “Don’t worry. I am.”

He swung his arms in a wide circle before thrusting them in the air, “Hyper Sword, activate!”

Two swords shot up from his wrist into the air, combining to form a

long phase sword. Bors did a kickflip, landing on his knee catching it.

“Hyper Sword mode activated!” he shouted to no one in particular.

The Wolf, trying to take advantage of Bors sweeping motions attacked, striking at him with his claws. Bors blocked it, the force of the blow pushing him back.

“Someone should teach you some new tricks!” he said, pushing him back.

He swung his sword furiously, the Wolf countering every attack he made. They moved back and forth, sparks flying from their weapons.

“You’re a powerful opponent!” Bors said, trying to gain an advantage, “I guess you were taught well in obedience school.”

What the heck is he saying? Ceri thought from the sidelines. *Is he taunting him?*

The wolf jumped backwards, surprised at Bors’s strength. He glanced at Ceri and ran towards him.

“You coward!” Bors said, rocketing over to her and slicing at the Wolf at the same time, “Someone should really teach you some manners!”

Ceri felt helpless as she watched the two fight. She had to have something in her arsenal that could help. She couldn’t risk using her guided missiles as they ran a risk of hitting Bors. Her guns were useless, he was just too fast. If she could only get him somewhere he couldn’t move. Her eyes opened wide as she realized what she had to do.

“Bors, hit him into the air!” she shouted, while assembling a

weapon from her arm.

The small scale rail gun that Mishti had developed for her would be able to pierce through almost everything, and it moved fast enough to practically be instantaneous. If she could just get him to be still for just a second, she'd be able to take him down.

Bors nodded at her, spinning around in a circle in a wide slash, forcing the Wolf backwards.

“Catch this!” he shouted as he shot a missile from his wrist.

The Wolf flew into the air to avoid it and flew forward at Bors trying to slash him. This was the opportunity needed. She aimed slightly above where Bors was at and fired, the rail gun emitting a low buzz.

“Here, Catch!” she shouted as the projectile released.

The projectile screamed forward, moving dozens of times faster than the speed of sound. The Wolf was about to claw Bors when suddenly, a heavy object hit his chest. He looked below, replacing his chest, there was a large hole. The projectile from the rail gun had blown right through him. He had hardly felt it. He slowly crashed to the ground as blackness overtook him.

Bors moved his arms in a circle before posing them upwards and to the side, kneeling down in the process, “I guess you can’t teach an old dog, new tricks.”

Ceri placed her palm on her forehead and shook her head, sighing. This is what she had to work with everyday.

As they were fighting, Jaled and Seth exchanged fire with the Bear. He was heavily armored and armed to the teeth, covered in all manner

of guns, explosives, rockets, and missiles. He laughed maniacally; he enjoyed killing.

Explosions ruptured near Seth and Jaled, who had to keep flying to avoid them.

“YOU CAN’T ESCAPE FROM ME!” the Bear shouted, sweeping his arm across the field as he fired from both a gattling gun and mortar shells.

Seth grinned, “Now this is my kind of battle!”

He flew forward amidst the explosions and fired his arm cannon at the Bear, which exploded in his face. The Bear was unscathed, his armor was much heavier than theirs was. Jaled dodged the bullet fire and shot at the Bear with his rifle, unable to do any damage.

The Bear just laughed and attacked randomly at them. They could do nothing against them.

“What kind of shielding is he using?” Jaled asked Seth, “To take on that much firepower without being affected is absurd.”

Seth looked at Jaled, his excitement overwhelming, “Who cares? This guy is a lot of fun. I’m enjoying this.”

Jaled shook his head; no warrior should enjoy battle. He had to fight, he had always fought, and he would keep on fighting when the war was over. He had seen many comrades die over the years and had experienced much grief.

“He’s toying with us!” He cursed as he tried to dodge all the heavy fire power the Bear was unleashing on them.

A large explosion ruptured near him, sending him to the ground, dazed. It hadn’t done any real damage, but his ears were ringing. He

cursed.

Seth attacked the bear, switching his weapon to an arm sword, which broke when he struck at the Bear. The Bear grabbed Seth, his arms crushing his Leviathan. Seth screamed in pain. The Bear Leviathan opened up its chest to reveal two barrel gatling guns. He opened fire on Seth, riddling him with bullets.

Seth just smiled back, none of the bullets penetrated his Leviathan. He released a flash grenade on his feet and broke out of the grip of the Bear and retreated backwards.

“I’d hate to admit it,” Seth said looking at Jaled, “but I think you’re right. His shielding is too much for any weapon that we have.”

Jaled nodded, “We’ll have to strike him in his eyes, that’s where he’s most vulnerable.”

“But even then, his eyes are well shielded. How would we break his visor?”

Jaled thought for a moment, “I doubt he’s protected from his own weaponry. If we could somehow turn that against him, we might just crack it enough for me to stab through.”

The Bear stared at them, temporarily stopping his onslaught. Inside his Leviathan, the Bear smiled crazily. He pulled a lever near his leg and hundreds of floating balls flew out of him, surrounding the nearby area.

“What the heck?!” Jaled said as two touched each other, exploding on impact.

Seth gritted his teeth, “He’s turn this place into a minefield.”

The Bear laughed crazily, “DIE! ALL OF YOU, DIE! LET ME

TASTE YOUR BLOOD!”

“How are we going to get past this?” Seth asked Jaled.

Jaled studied the mines, “It seems that they’re impact based explosives. I’m afraid if we try shooting at them, they’ll only explode.”

Seth grinned, “Then that’s my answer.”

He moved forward, firing with his gatling gun. Each ball hit exploded in a ball of fire until the whole field was one big explosion. The Bear wasn’t expecting it to happen, and his suit took some damage, and a thin crack formed across the visor.

Jaled took advantage of the opportunity, rushing forward at the Bear who was still blinded by the smoke. As the smoke cleared, Jaled was on top of the bear, holding a phase sword above his eyes. The Bear trembled in fear.

“Wait!” He pleaded, “Don’t kill me! Show some mercy.”

Jaled grinned, “I’ve been on the battlefield for over twenty years. Had you fought anyone else, they may have shown mercy, but I have never shown mercy to an enemy before.”

He stabbed down with his sword, shattering the Bear’s visor. He collapsed on the ground, dead. Jaled wiped his blade and sheathed it. Seth stared at Jago, shock still on his face, his armor charred from the explosions.

“You know, Jaled,” he said grinning, “for as crazy as everybody says I am, you are a million times crazier.”

Jaled shrugged, “I do what I must, nothing more, nothing less.”

They walked away from the burning wasteland, their enemy

decimated.

As everyone else was fighting, Jago continued to battle Lynn. Tyrn could only watch from the sidelines. She felt so useless, again. She kept pointing her rifle at Lynn, but he was just moving too fast. They moved like lightning, zipping back and forth in the air.

With every punch he threw, Lynn could feel his emotions awakening; he could feel the terrors in his heart. No matter what he tried to do, Jago blocked or dodged it. It wasn't just that he changed, it was like he was an entirely new person.

Jago observed every move Lynn made, anticipated his every action, blocked every blow. He wasn't just winning, Lynn had failed to hit him even once. It was a complete reversal of their last battle. Before it had been Jago who had lost his cool, but he could feel Lynn's emotions boiling up inside him. With every punch he blocked, with every kick that he dodged, he could only feel sorrow and fright from Lynn's fist.

They say that when two experienced warriors fight, they speak through their fists. As Jago fought Lynn, he began to understand. Lynn had not wanted to kill his parents or his brother, he didn't want to even fight in the war, but his father made him. Yet he still had killed them, and it was an act of volition, completely voluntary.

Jago's mind flashed back to the night Lynn killed his parents. For the first time, he truly saw Lynn in the rain, his kind eyes looking at him. He was crying, not smiling. He had given up everything that he cared about to follow after his father.

"Why?" Jago demanded, "Why did you follow him? It's not like you even wanted power."

Lynn looked at him in surprise, his emotions betrayed him. He

missed his punch which Jago grabbed.

“I don’t have to tell you anything!” Lynn shouted, breaking Jago’s grip on him.

He fled backwards, terrified. His heart no longer felt empty. It was filled with guilt and horror. He ran away from Jago, scared of what he was feeling. *How could he have changed so much? How could he do this to me?*

Jago followed after Lynn, determined. He no longer hated Lynn, but he had to be stopped. His words seemed to be affecting him. He had unnerved Lynn, to the point where he ran away from him. Jago shrouded his feet in Sei and vanished into the air.

He appeared in Front of Lynn who stopped short and punched at him. Jago dodged and hit Lynn in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him. Lynn staggered backwards, clutching his stomach.

“How?” he demanded, “How did you get so strong?”

Jago stood there, not moving forward. Lynn was not a threat to him anymore, “I let go. I let go of all the hate and sorrow in my heart. It had crippled me, leaving me a shell of who I truly was. It’s time you did the same. I felt it while we were fighting. You may be able to hide it from everyone else, but you can’t hide it from me! INSIDE, YOU’RE CRYING OUT IN PAIN!”

Lynn rushed forward at Jago in rage, “SHUT UP! WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT ME!?”

He punched at Jago, his fist shrouded in emerald flames. Jago grabbed his arm and threw him across the field with incredible power, sending Lynn flying. Lynn fired his rockets, stopping himself. He was

breathing heavily.

Jago slowly flew towards him, “You were my best friend. How could I not know when you are trembling with sadness?”

Lynn concentrated his power in his hand. *He’s just trying to get to me*, Lynn thought as his arm started to vibrate. *I can’t let him win!* An emerald and ebony tiger surrounded his body. He could feel the power surrounding him, the air thickening, hear the sparks flying. He rushed forward at Jago, screaming.

Jago pushed back with his own fist, the two of theirs colliding in mid air. The air around them pushed back, creating a small crater on the ground below them. They were both surrounded by an aura, Lynn’s ebony and emerald, Jago’s golden and white. They tore across the sky, Lynn’s tiger trying to find any weakness in Jago’s defense.

Jago was as calm as the wind, blocking and dodging everything Lynn threw at him. They flew high into the sky, above the clouds. Lynn was getting tired, the battle had been draining his emotions. Jago stared at Lynn in pity, he didn’t see a demon anymore. He saw a man drowning in sadness.

Lynn attacked Jago furiously, trying to destroy him. *I can’t let him escape!* Lynn thought, *I can’t let him prove himself right!* He punched with even more force than before, pushing Jago backwards. He moved his fists faster and faster, trying to get Jago’s voice out of his head.

Jago looked in surprise as Lynn hit him in the face, sending him reeling backwards. There was no strength behind the attack; he was unaffected. Lynn rushed after him, more confident than before.

“I WON’T LET YOU BEAT ME!” he shouted, his emerald tiger screaming forward at Jago.

Jago clapped his hands, arcs of electricity escaping out of them. He surrounded his body in Kan, his white aura expanding into a sphere. The air crackled with electricity as the tiger was swallowed up in his aura. He brought back his right arm and concentrated all of his Sei and Tō in his hand. Electric blue light surrounded his hand, crackling with excitement.

Lynn stared at Jago's aura, frozen in fear. He saw him using Sei, Tō, and Kan at the same time. *That's impossible!* He tried to move, but couldn't. His body wouldn't respond.

Jago's white sphere encompassed Lynn, a golden dragon forming around Jago's body. He pushed his arm forward, his body moving with the golden dragon. His fist met Lynn's face, and he started to push him towards the ground.

"Mugen Rai Ryu Ken," Jago stated calmly, as they spiraled towards the ground.

Lynn could feel the dragon crushing him, burning him, shocking him. He screamed in pain and frustration as they flew towards the ground.

They crashed into the ground, the golden dragon transforming into a column of light. The others all watched in anticipation as the area around Jago and Lynn exploded. As the smoke cleared, Jago stood over Lynn in a small crater.

Lynn's Leviathan was breaking apart. His helmet was cracked, part of the arms and legs were missing, and a large chunk of the chest. He laid on the ground in pain and frustration, his body unresponsive. Jago turned his back to him; he had beaten him.

"NO!!!!" Lynn shouted at him, "I CAN'T BE BEATEN LIKE

THIS!!”

Jago turned back to Lynn in pity. It was over, he had won. The others surrounded Jago in triumph. He had done it.

Lynn laughed, his laugh haggard and weak. He pushed a button on his wrist, everyone but Tyrn were paralyzed, a powerful shock going through their bodies. They screamed in pain. Tyrn looked in confusion and shock as Lynn got up. She pointed her rifle at him, firing at him. They did nothing against him as he approached Jago, one arm limp and bleeding.

“I knew that they would never beat your men,” he said as he limped over to Jago, “That’s why I had them place disrupting devices on all of you. When I punched you in the face, I placed mine.”

He smiled maliciously, glancing between Jago and Tyrn, “In the off chance that you would have beaten me, I had this plan in place. You’ve all lost.”

Jago watched in horror as Lynn approached Tyrn, who kept firing at him. Her bullets bounced off of him like rain droplets. Jago watched as emerald flames sprung up from Lynn’s right arm.

“Before I kill you,” he taunted, “I want you to watch as I kill your precious lieutenant, your partner.”

Tyrn could only watch in terror as Lynn brought his hand backwards, an ebony and emerald tiger forming in his hands.

“NO!!!” Jago shouted as he tried to think of a way to move, his body trembling in pain.

He pushed a button on his waist using Tō and his body popped out of the Axial, standing with a fury. Lynn looked at him in surprise, *Is he*

going to fight me without a Leviathan?! What a fool!

Jago took a step forward, his body breaking the speed of sound. Lynn watched in surprise as Jago appeared in front of him. Lynn felt his body get hit with a hundred fists at once, each blow devastating.

Jago pushed forward, unrelenting, “TYRN, SETH, JALED, BEN, I’M NOT GOING TO LET YOU TOUCH ANY OF THEM!!!!”

He kept punching, his spirit on fire, “SHIN MAN KEN!!!!”

Thousands of punches hit Lynn at once, destroying the rest of the Bastion.

“RAH!!!” Jago shouted as he kept punching, each punch protecting the people around him.

As the 10,000 punches finished, Jago kept pushing forward, remembering the words of his master, “If you meet a man who can stand from this attack, he would be immortal.”

“I’M NOT DONE YET!” he shouted, “SHIN MAN KEN, TIMES 100!!!!”

The Company watched in awe as Jago kept up his onslaught, bombarding Lynn with thousands of punches. Their paralysis stopped and they returned to normal.

Tyrn held both arms together in excitement, “GO!!!” she shouted to Jago.

The rest of the Company chipped in as well, their bodies swelled up in anticipation, “DO IT!!!!”

Jago kept punching, his arms trembling, incredible power flowing through them, and he kept screaming. Lynn was tossed around like a rag

doll, unable to control any part of his body. Jago's 1,000,000th punch, his final punch, hit Lynn in the face, sending him flying back. His body twisted and turned as he rolled through the dirt, careening backwards at high velocities. Finally he stopped, his body a pulp, broken, and bruised.

The rest of the Company jumped out of their Leviathans to congratulate Jago, everyone grabbing him. Tyrn reached him first, holding him in a tight embrace.

"You did it!" she exclaimed as she held him close, "It's finally over!"

The rest slapped him on the back, shook his hand, and Seth threw him onto his shoulders. The battalions who had watched the battle in wonder ran out of their trenches, cheering. Jago had done the impossible. He had beaten Lynn, the Emerald Tiger, and he did it without a Leviathan!

A soldier approached Lynn in curiosity, disgusted by what he saw. Lynn stirred weakly, his breathing subdued.

"HE'S STILL ALIVE!" he shouted to everyone else.

They put down Jago, who nodded. Tyrn looked up at him in surprise; she never would have thought that Jago would leave Lynn alive.

"He'll have to answer for what he's done," Jago told them, staring at Lynn's body, "I doubt he will ever be able to fight again."

Tyrn hugged him tighter, her admiration for him growing, "I can't believe it Jago. After all these years, it's finally over."

Jago shook his head and held her tight in his arms, "It's not over

yet.”

Chapter 24

*The Dragon roared in
victory; the mighty cub
had been defeated. All that
remained was to take down
the Tiger.*

- Torashi Yokubo: Emperor of Irati

Edaj Forsigth sat on his throne, wringing his hands, his irritation growing. *Lynn left over twelve hours ago, he thought as his fury boiled, that should have been more than enough time to kill the upstart, Jago Kale.* His nervousness grew as well, as he remembered the skills of his former master, Roken Jiryuku. *It's not a matter of whether he can kill him at will anymore. If Roken taught him the Shin Kyō, Lynn will never be able to beat him no matter what tricks he uses. Curse him! His overconfidence will be his downfall!*

Suddenly, an officer rushed into the throne room and kneeled down, his face morbid and worried. He looked up at his king.

“Sir, our spies have just received news concerning the Prince,” he paused.

Edaj Forsigth waved his arm in front of him in impatience, “Yes, Captain? Get on with it.”

The captain hesitated, “It appears sir, that he’s been defeated...”

Edaj narrowed his eyes, his body trembling in rage. The captain cowered in fear, feeling the killing presence of his master.

“Is he alive?” Edaj asked, his voice dangerously quiet.

“I am not sure sire,” the captain responded at once as he presented a

tablet to his master, “This is all we know of his condition.”

Edaj grabbed the tablet and looked at the first image displayed. Lynn barely looked human; his body was broken; his face twisted. Edaj gripped the tablet dangerously tight as he sifted through the various photos taken. The tablet was crushed underneath his grip and fell to the ground. His eyes were open wide in rage and shock.

They killed him. They killed Lynn. They didn't just kill him, they beat him to death. They had to have tortured him for hours to make him look like that. Edaj stood, his body trembling. Black flames rose up from his feet and surrounded his body. The captain scooted backwards in fear. *They will pay for this,* Edaj thought as he looked towards the captain, *they all will pay for this.*

The captain trembled at the sight of the black flames, his voice barely more than a whisper, “There is more news sire.”

“WHAT?!” Edaj demanded, his voice dangerously low.

“We’ve lost all contact with the battalions at the front, sir. It appears that we have lost,” the captain stuttered, “We only have four battalions left in the entire army.”

The flames around Edaj grew larger, threatening to consume the captain. *I’ve lost everything,* Edaj thought, his mind no longer rational. *Roken has beaten me through and through. He knew that this would happen, it’s all his fault! That boy he trained, Jago Kale, he’s just a puppet in his game. He acts like he doesn’t care what happens in the world, but he’s the one pulling all of the strings.*

He looked upwards, the light from the crystals illuminating his face. Black mist spread out from his feet, encompassing the whole throne room. The captain stared in horror at his master, who looked like a

monster. His skin was almost as white as his hair, his eyes glowing emerald.

You wait for some great calamity to happen, Roken, Edaj thought as he stared at the mosaic above his palace, which was the shape of an emerald tiger. A calamity that was told to you over a thousand years ago by a passing stranger. You don't realize it already has happened, that your failure to act has caused the nations to be how they are. Only I had the power to unite this world, to force Ti be recognized, and you've taken that away from me. Had I not ordered the boy's family killed, would you still have sent him after me?

He clenched his hands in rage, emerald flames escaping out of the black. *The boy. He will pay dearly for his actions. There will be no place for him to hide, no sanction that will keep him safe. And when he does face me, I'll break him, even as he broke my son.*

His head turned to the captain, who was almost overcome by Edaj's presence, "Bring all the battalions back here. All are to defend the Capital."

The captain dropped his head, "Right away my lord."

Edaj watched the captain hurry out of the throne room in fear. Before he reached the doors, Edaj called out to him, "Captain."

The captain turned, horrified, "My lord?"

"He's coming for us Captain. None shall stand a chance against him except me. Be prepared, your life may soon come to an end."

The captain nodded, understanding, "Yes, my lord."

The captain hurried out the palace doors, not looking back. Edaj let his flames fill the throne room, consuming any and all flammable

substances. The whole palace shook beneath his power.

“COME AT ME!!!” Edaj shouted towards the sky, “I’LL MAKE YOU SUFFER THE SAME AS HOW YOU MADE HIM SUFFER!!”

The citizens of Jindel looked in wonder as black and emerald flames surrounded the entirety of the palace. None suspected the torment that was happening to the man inside.

*In all my years, I had
never seen someone fight
so furiously or fierce. The
war was over in just a few
day. That was the
difference in our power.*

- Sunah Tomath: Iratian Brigadier General

Jago stood in a makeshift conference room, inside a tent, on the Western Front. After a long hard night, his team had made short work of the other battlefields. Lynn had been taken prisoner and was in critical condition. The doctors told him that his likelihood of dying was high. Jago knew differently. Lynn was a survivor, like him. He wouldn't let those injuries stop him. When the war was finally over, they could start over again. Jago doubted they'd ever become friends, but they would no longer be enemies.

Tyrn stood next to him, her eyes lidded with tire. She looked like she was ready to collapse. They hadn't had a chance to rest. The rest of the Company stood behind him, just as tired. Jago felt as fresh as he had ever been, his fight with Lynn washing away any and all tiredness within him. The rest of the battlefields that night seemed like a rest compared to that fight. He had been careful not to overdo it, by keeping his Ti usage to a minimum. Only five people had died during the previous day, the Beasts that Lynn had with him. The army was overwhelmed with the amount of prisoners they had.

Jago looked at the rest of the people gathered there, a few dozen officers in the Iratian army. General Tomath was there with three other generals, all who outranked him. They were the generals who manned

the frontlines. Among the generals were a dozen colonels, a couple dozen majors, and almost fifty captains. It was most of their military might. Most stared at Jago in wonder, amazed that someone could accomplish so much so quickly.

General Remms was briefing the officers on what had occurred the previous day and night, and explained how they now had the advantage in the war.

“This war is practically over,” he told the officers, “The Corvan army has been thoroughly crushed. They stand no chance against us now. That’s why we’re going to do one final push against their capital, Jindel. Our spies have confirmed that they’ve moved the rest of their battalions to Jindel, to protect the king.”

He pointed to Jago, “Captain Kale here will be issuing your orders from here, as he knows Edaj Forsigth’s strength better than anyone else here.”

Jago nodded, expecting this. General Remms told him before they met inside the tent that he would be in charge of overseeing the battle. He stood at the makeshift podium that they made and stared at everyone there, who anticipated his orders.

He took a deep breath and began, “Okay soldiers, as you know, Jindel is protected by an electromagnetic barrier that prevents aerial bombardment and direct assault from the city, just like Atoli. Our first objective will be to destroy the primary transistor, which keeps it running. Therefore, I will go by myself to-.”

Ben interrupted him, “Captain, I’ll take on the barrier. You can focus on taking Edaj down.”

Jago stared at Ben and narrowed his eyes, “You told me the Eagle

Leviathan isn't responding since Lynn's attack."

Ben shook his head, "It isn't but that doesn't matter. I can take it down without the Eagle Leviathan."

Jago and Ben exchanged a fierce gaze. The air in the tent grew fierce as the officers looked at the two studying each other.

Finally, Jago submitted, "Correction, Warrant Officer Draks will take down the primary transistor, allowing us to enter the capital."

The officers started to mumble between themselves, discussing Ben's strength and power.

Jago ignored them, "Two full battalions are stationed there, which we will leave Warrant Officer Draks to take care of."

Ben nodded at him, understanding.

"The rest of the Corvan army will be stationed outside of the palace, which is what our primary forces will be focusing on. We outnumber them ten to one; they will be crushed like ants underneath our feet. Brigadier General Tomath will be leading his forces against their frontline defense, by utilizing our Commando squads to prevent as many deaths as possible.

"General Remm's forces will focus on securing the city, preventing civilian death, and from preventing enemy soldiers from escaping. His forces will enter from the front and spread out to every building. His forces will consist of the Special Forces squadrons and will protect the civilians at all cost.

"General Kidash's forces will establish a perimeter around the city, preventing both supplies to come in and out from the city. Their secondary objective is to cut off communication with outside forces, to

prevent from any ragtag armies from rising up against us. These forces will consist of the frontline battalions.

“General Modah’s forces will be our reserve forces, and General Modah will command them as he sees fit. They will position themselves one click away from the city and will receive constant updates from the other generals. Hopefully, we will not need to use General Modah’s forces at all. I fully expect all of our soldiers to survive this battle.

“I will attack Edaj Forsigth myself, with Lieutenant Forsigth. My goal will not be for him to sign a treaty, but to take him down. He is as powerful as I am and must be stopped.”

The soldiers looked at each other nervously. Anyone who was as powerful as Jago made them stop in their tracks.

“Once I have defeated him, the Corvans can establish a new king so that we can annex them into the Empire. We want as few as casualties as possible here, so if the white flag is given, ceasefire immediately. We will accept their surrender unconditionally. We will head out at dawn. You are all dismissed.”

The officers soon broke up to discuss the battle amongst themselves. None of them had a doubt that they would win. The final battle approached; they would win.

Jago stood next to the Company, who were all silent. They knew their duties, there was no point in discussing it. Several shot Ben concerned glances, who simply closed his eyes in peace. He was prepared.

Tyrn leaned against Jago, nearly falling asleep. Jago smiled, she was warm.

He held her, “Are you okay?”

She glanced upwards at him and blinked, “Just a little tired,” she yawned.

Jago nodded, “Well, we have an entire day before we head out. Do you want to get some sleep?”

Tyrn shrugged, “Sure, why not? Thanks for letting me stick with you, I appreciate it.”

Jago laughed, “After all that we’ve been through together, how could I not let you join me?”

He led her outside the tent into a nearby one that he had setup earlier for her. He put her down in the cot. “Just get some rest, okay? Tomorrow will be a long day.”

Tyrn just nodded back and fell asleep. Jago exited her tent, his heart heavy. The entire army was depending on him to defeat Edaj. If he failed, not only would he die, but everyone he cared about would die. His master said they were equal in skills, so he did have a good chance of beating him.

He sat down outside Tyrn’s tent, pondering what he had to do. Edaj had control of Shin Kyō just as he. The war that he had been fighting for over five years was almost over. He thought his soul would be in turmoil, that he would be overcome with anxiousness, yet he was perfectly calm. He was at peace. No matter what happened, he had found his peace.

People all around him scrambled to get ready for the battle. Hours passed as he sat still, pondering the battle ahead. He wondered why his master refused to get involved, why he had to beat Edaj Forsigth. It wasn’t his family anymore that he fought, it was for a future of peace

that he wished to grab. Was there no other way to have that peace besides fighting each other? It seemed sad to him that two men, who had studied under the same person, could have such drastically different feelings on what they believed. He should have looked up to Edaj Forsigth as a source of inspiration, but he could only feel sadness in his heart. *Why did he have my parents killed? Jago wondered, why did he bring me into this war? Is it because of Master? What could have happened between them to make him hate him so much?*

Morning came quickly as Jago pondered there in the dirt. An hour before sunrise, Tyrn exited the tent, looking refreshed. Jago smiled at her.

“How are you feeling?”

She glanced down at him, her smile genuine, “Ready.”

Jago nodded. They walked together to address the troops. The Company fell in behind them, each of their faces determined. It would end today. They approached the other officers, who were all lined up. Jago looked at all of them, they were ready. The Company broke up to join their divisions, the rest of the company was there.

Jago looked at all of their faces, remembering all of the memories they had together. He looked at General Tomath, who had only pride in his eyes. General Remm stood up to address the troops.

“These past few years have been difficult for many of you. You’ve all seen loved ones die, family, friends, comrades. With each death, our resolve was strengthened. We would not back down. We came together as a nation, as a people, to defend what we knew was right. We helped neighbors, friends, companions, all of them get through life without those close to them.”

The soldiers looked at each other, this kind of speech was unexpected.

“We’ve banded together as brothers and sisters to free one another from the chains of sorrow and depression. And from those chains, we’ve grown stronger. We are no longer the people we were when this war started. Each of us have changed, in more ways then we can count.”

Jago looked at Tyrn, as she looked back, their eyes sharing the same knowledge. Jago remembered how he was and how he had changed. Tyrn did the same.

“So, as we go out there to battle today, remember that strength. Remember what bonds us together as brothers and sisters in arms. I believe that each of us have the capability to overcome that which threatens us, to make peace even in the most war ridden times. We each have an obligation to grasp our own happiness, so reach out and grab it. As you are fighting out there today, remember this, our happiness can only be obtained if we take it ourselves. So suit up and grasp your happiness.”

He ended and turned his back to the soldiers. They all saluted in return. They were all prepared. They all scrambled to get suit up in their Leviathans, all that is but Ben. He only took a thermal charge from Mishti as well as the Iratian flag, the Crimson Eagle. The battle was about to begin.

Chapter 26

*He stared at me as I fired
at him, his eyes chilling me
to the bone. I never even
came close to hitting him.
He just walked on.*

- Augoso Rivel: Corvan Officer

Augoso Rivel, a Colonel in the Corvan army, surveyed the land in front of him, looking for the coming Iratian army. Reports had come in that they were on their way. The electromagnetic barrier hummed softly next to him. He had 5,000 soldiers under his control and another officer had another 5,000. No one was going to take down the barrier. The generator slowly kicked up the dust on the ground surrounding it. *Where could they be?*

A corporal near him suddenly shouted at him, “Colonel! Someone’s coming!”

Augoso grinned, they were coming, “How many Corporal?”

The corporal was stunned, “One, sir.”

The colonel could see why he was stunned, “One thousand?” That was not a lot to send after them. They would be outnumbered ten to one.

The corporal shook his head, “No sir. One.”

The colonel was confused, “What?! There must be some kind of mistake.”

“Look sir,” he pointed, “Over there.”

He zoomed in with his Leviathan to where the corporal was pointing at. Slowly walking towards them was a single man, who held the Iratian Imperial Flag on his back with a large pack. He wasn't wearing a Leviathan. He looked determined. His pace never slowed.

Ben walked forward, his heart as calm as the wind. He knew that this day would come, his father foretold him many years ago back in his small village.

"There will come a time, Little Eagle," his father had told him, "That you must carry the Crimson Eagle to the Emerald Tiger to free the rest of the eagles. You must not be armed, nor protected. You will only walk forward, never slowing. The spirits of our ancestors will protect you, as well as the eagle in you. You must walk forward and free your brothers."

Ben understood. This was what his father had foretold him. His father was never wrong in his predictions. He walked slowly forward, his pace calm and calculated. He kept his gaze forward towards the primary transistor, which had an emerald tiger emblazoned on it.

"What's he doing?" Augoso asked the corporal, "Doesn't he realize that he's going to get slaughtered?"

The corporal shrugged, "Maybe he's surrendering?"

The colonel shook his head; that wasn't right. He looked at the man's face, there was no betrayal or submission there. He walked proud and confident.

He opened up his comms, "Colonel Strom, this is Colonel Rivel. We have a man here who's walking towards us with an Iratian flag. He's not in a Leviathan and appears unarmed. What should we do?"

"I see him. Let's fire some warning shots," the other colonel

responded, “if he comes any further, we’ll have no choice but to shoot him.”

The colonel nodded and switched comms, “Sargeant Born, fire warning shots at our wanderer.”

“Yes sir,” the soldier responded, taking a step towards Ben.

“Attention civilian,” the sergeant declared on his loudspeaker towards Ben, “You are in restricted Corvan space. Retreat now or you will be shot.”

Ben ignored him entirely, and he walked on.

The sergeant gave the signal for his platoon to fire. They came up on both sides of Ben, shooting up the dirt near him.

“Attention,” the sergeant shouted over his loudspeaker, “We will not issue another warning shot. Flee now or be destroyed.”

Ben ignored the sergeant and he walked past the first few Leviathans, who parted to let him through.

Sergeant Born looked to Colonel Strom who nodded at him. He gave the signal for lethal force. The nearby Leviathan’s opened fire at Ben, their bullets whistling past him.

None hit him, and he walked on.

“I signaled for no more warning shots!” Born shouted through his comms.

His shoulders shrugged, “We fired to kill sergeant. I guess we just missed.”

“Well shoot him!” he shouted back.

The soldiers advanced to where Ben was, blocking from walking. He did not hesitate or glance as he continued to walk forward. the soldiers backed up in response.

“What’s with this guy?!” one of them asked as they fired at him, missing again.

None of their bullets could hit him. They did not bounce off of him or swerve in direction. They just missed.

Ben walked on towards the primary transistor, the Corvan soldiers jumping out of his way for no reason. Soon, thousands of Corvan soldiers surrounded him.

“Don’t make a move!” one of them shouted, “We have you surrounded!”

Ben did not slow down; he feared nothing. He walked past soldier after soldier. The soldier who issued the warning at him fired, missing him entirely.

And Ben walked on.

More shots from the enemy screamed towards him, none hitting their mark.

Auguso stared in amazement at Ben. He pulled up his comms, “Colonel Strom, are you seeing this?”

“I can’t believe it either,” Colonel Strom responded, dazed.

Hundreds of bullets zoomed past Ben, who never hesitated, who never paused, who never even attempted to dodge.

And he walked on.

The Corvan soldiers were astonished, how could they keep

missing?!

“What’s wrong with you dogs?!” Colonel Strom demanded of his soldiers, “KILL HIM!!!”

A whirlwind of bullets engulfed Ben, none reaching their mark. Several of the bullets hit several soldiers, killing them instantly.

And Ben did not hesitate as he walked on!

One soldier, fed up with missing Ben, threw a grenade at him. The others ran away from Ben in fear. The grenade hit a rock near Ben’s feet which sent it back towards the thrower. The soldier looked in fear as the grenade landed near him.

“OH CRA-!” he started to exclaim as the grenade blew up around him, taking down a dozen soldiers with him.

Other soldiers just stared at Ben in horror. This was not an ordinary man that they were facing.

“What is this man,” a soldier wondered in fear, “some sort of demon?”

Colonel Strom was losing his patience, “HE’S JUST ONE MAN!!! SOMEBODY KILL HIM!!!!”

Yet none of their bullets reached Ben. He continued to walk on, the soldiers unconsciously making a path for him to the primary transistor. Soldiers stopped firing to watch Ben in amazement.

And he walked on.

Colonel Rivel could only watch in fear as Ben walked on. He had seen some crazy things as a frontline soldier, but this was ludicrous. No one could stand unscathed by so many rounds fired at them. He

wondered if he was indeed a man, or a spirit like his men said.

In desperation, two threw grenades at Ben only for them to bounce away from him and explode on the other line of soldiers. The ground shook beneath the explosions, forcing the ones nearby it, on the knees. But Ben remained unscathed, completely unphased by the explosions.

And he walked on.

“WHAT IS GOING ON?!!!!” Colonel Strom exclaimed. He looked to the soldiers near him, “Go in close combat. CUT HIM TO PIECES!!!”

Several soldiers advanced forward, phase swords in hand, and sliced out at Ben. They all missed. Several took missteps, tripping into the soldier next to them and accidentally slicing them. Others just missed as their blades buzzed swiftly as they passed his face. Ben ignored them, his pace the same as it always was.

He did not raise his hand to attack once, yet he still walked on!

Several Corvans dropped their weapons in fear and started to flee. Colonel Strom looked in rage as his men ran like the cowards they were. They did not look back.

“He’s a demon, none can stop him!” one shouted as he ran.

“He’s going to kill us all!” another screamed as he bolted.

Colonel Strom shot them down in disgust, “Where are you going, cowards!? If you dare try to run away like those men, I’ll not hesitate to shoot you!!”

Yet none would approach Ben, because they knew that they could not touch him. They had faced many enemies during their lives as soldiers, but an enemy they could not physically hit was a first. It

wasn't even a question of skill; they just could not hit him.

“FINE THEN!!!!” Colonel Strom challenged, “I’LL COME AT YOU MYSELF!!!”

Colonel Rivel watched in horror as the other colonel flew at Ben, knowing his fate was sealed. There was no man, woman, or ungodly demon alive that could kill that man. He could see it in Ben’s face, there was no danger that he was facing.

As Colonel Strom approached Ben, one of his soldiers made the mistake of firing at Ben as he continued walking, missing him. His round hit Colonel Strom’s grenade belt. He was blown to smithereens with the surrounding soldiers near him.

The Colonel’s men looked in horror as their commanding officer turned to dust. They started to drop their weapons and actively run away. They didn’t care what their commanding officers had to say. No sense of duty or loyalty would ever have given the courage to fight someone who was seemingly immortal. They started to flee from what they called the Walking Warrior.

Ben got closer to the primary transistor, only Colonel Rivel stood in his way. Colonel Rivel raised his pistol at Ben, his arms shaking. His body was covered in sweat and his breathing haggard. He had never been so afraid in his life. He cocked his gun.

For the first time, Ben took his eyes off of the primary transistor. He slowly turned his head to look at Colonel Rivel, who was trembling. He did not slow down his pace. Colonel Rivel dropped his gun and collapsed to his knees, his breathing even heavier than before.

What is he? he wondered as he cowered. *That look he gave me, it wasn't human. I knew that if I were to fire my pistol, then I would have*

died. There are times when a person just knows that they are in mortal danger, and Colonel Rivel was overcome with that feeling. *There isn't a being alive that can take him down.*

Colonel Rivel's soldiers, seeing his reaction, lowered their weapons. They knew that they were outmatched.

They watched in awe as Ben reached the primary transistor. He took off the pack on his back and took out a large explosive. He armed it and placed it on the small tower.

Colonel Rivel watched in amazement as Ben didn't back up, *Is he planning on killing himself?*

Ben pushed down on the trigger, and was engulfed in a large explosion. As a small twist of fate, the electromagnetic barrier swirled around Ben and the explosion was pushed upwards. The surrounding area was engulfed in black smoke.

Colonel Rivel looked for the Walking Warrior as the smoke started to clear. His eyes opened wide in shock. Atop the rubble of what was the primary transistor, Ben stood unscathed. His pack and the flag remained unharmed as well. The soldiers watched in amazement as he took it from his pack and firmly planted it on the ground, the Crimson Eagle proudly displaying.

Overhead, a giant shadow cast over the soldiers. They looked upwards. A giant bird was blocking part of the sun. It descended gradually towards Ben. The soldiers looked on, mesmerized.

A giant bald eagle perched on his shoulder and cawed loudly. Ben looked upwards, smiling, "Thank you father."

One by one, the soldiers around Ben started to bow. They had seen an act of providence. There was no question, now. They were never

meant to hit Ben. They were on the wrong side. Several had tears in their eyes at seeing something so beautiful.

Ben bent down, pulling a radio out of his pack.

“This is Warrant Officer Draks,” he said calmly as the eagle flew away, free. “I’ve taken down the electromagnetic barrier, you are go for assault. I repeat this is Warrant Officer Draks, I’ve taken down the barrier, you are go for assault.”

He cast his gaze heavenward, thanking his father for his prophecy. His final part in the war was finished.

Chapter 27

*We fought with glory, with
honor. They had none of
that. It was more than just
war to us. It was our way
of life.*

- Ilel Kran: Iratian Sergeant

The Iratian army cheered as they saw the barrier surrounding Jindel collapsed, cracking and buzzing with electricity. The Corvan soldiers inside the city watched in horror as their last line of defense broke down. The excitement amongst the Iratian soldiers was almost electric. They craved to end the war.

Jago rushed forward in his Axial, Tyrn right behind him. They were going to push straight towards the palace. Behind them, the 100,000 other Iratian soldiers followed suit, confident in their abilities.

They rocketed into the city, avoiding buildings and whatever else was in their way. The streets were empty. All of the people were hiding. They knew that their city was under attack. 10,000 Corvan soldiers were lined up near the palace. They were terrified. They knew no matter how good of soldiers they were, they didn't stand a chance against Captain Jago Kale, who single handedly took out most of the soldiers himself in one night.

The Iratian soldiers split off into their groups, each one going to his assigned task. 25,000 soldiers continued to follow Jago to the palace. Enemy fire took on them immediately, explosions erupting in front of them. Jago and Tyrn flew over them and dodged the enemy fire. The Corvan stopped firing at them, and they continued to the palace. The

royal guard would deal with them.

General Tomath led his soldiers in attack against the Corvan, their strength unstoppable. Gunfire and explosions erupted in the streets near the palace, causing the ground to tremble. The city had turned into a battle zone.

Ilek flew his platoon to the very front lines, to avoid as much casualties as possible. He knew that his Commando unit could take much more heat than the others.

“Ichi, Ni,” he commanded, “make it rain.”

Two large Leviathans broke off from his group flying high in the air. They were armed with all manner of rockets and missiles. They unloaded all that they had against the Corvan soldiers, blowing up a good chunk of the soldiers. They dropped back down, unscathed.

Ilek grinned, all was going according to plan, “San through Juni, make them dance.”

Ten soldiers at the front pulled out heavy Gatling guns from their backs. They unleashed terror upon the Corvan soldiers, who could not take their fire. Heavy mortars exploded above them, the heat searing the sides of several Leviathans. The explosion quaked the ground, causing several of Ilek’s Leviathans to fall.

“This is Sergeant Kran, report your injuries.” Ilek commanded through his comms.

“Got a little scorched but nothing serious,” one responded.

The rest responded positively as well, there were no major injuries.

Ilek sighed in relief.

“I need you to make sure you take care of yourselves during this fight, we don’t want to lose anyone in the last battle,” he chastised, “The Captain’s counting on us.”

He pulled out a mortar and shot it a squad of nearby Corvans, “And I have no plans on disappointing him.”

Jaled and Seth fought side by side, like they always did. Their platoons provided support behind them. They were surrounded by enemy Corvan units on all sides.

“Just like Morda, right Old Man?” Seth grinned as he fired his automatic grenade launcher at some enemies, incinerating them in the process.

Jaled shook his head, “This is much easier then Morda. We were outnumbered ten to one then.” He fired his automatic rifle at a few dozen Corvans, stopping them in their attacks.

“Maybe your right,” Seth shouted over the gunfire, “Morda was more fun. These guys are pushovers. I guess all the real tough soldiers were kept at the frontline.”

“Regardless,” Jaled warned, “Watch your back. This’ll get dangerous. They’ll start targeting us since we’re so heavy hitters.”

Seth glanced back at Jaled, “With you with me? There’ll be no need. You’ve already got it covered.”

Jaled fired a mortar at the enemy, “You know kid,” he huffed, “one of these days, I won’t be there to bail you out, and then where will you

be?”

They fired in a circle, taking out all nearby units. They stood amongst the smoldering wreckage of the Corvan Leviathans.

Seth chuckled, “When that happens, I’ll finally be able to have some fun. There’s no real challenge here.”

Orlo flew back and forth through the streets, looking to protect any civilians. He thought it would be best for his platoon to join up with General Remm’s special forces. They would be no good in the primary assault. Of all the soldiers in the company, Orlo considered his platoon to be the weakest. They weren’t the fighting type. They avoided as much battle as they could, including Orlo.

Orlo flew through the alleys of Jindel, his Leviathan looking for any biological signatures. Hundreds of other Iratian soldiers helped him. They searched through the city, unable to find anyone.

“Where did all of the citizens go?” Orlo asked to no one in particular.

The twenty soldiers in his platoon soon returned to him, unable to find anyone. Everyone in the city was gone. It was as if they just vanished.

“Sir,” one of Orlo’s soldiers addressed, “There are no heat signatures in the city besides the Corvan units. What do you think could have happened?”

Orlo stood, thinking there for a moment. He wasn’t smart like Mishti or Roso were. He was observant though. The houses he passed by showed no sign of hurry or panic. Everything was in its place. It

didn't look like anyone had been evacuated.

He turned on his comms, "Colonel Yvette, this is Sergeant Orlo Goff, reporting. There's no sign of life here."

Colonel Yvette responded, "I realize that Sergeant. I don't see where they could have gone, we would've seen them escape the city. General Remm, what's your opinion?"

"It seems that King Forsigth was anticipating our strike. It seems that they must've been moved underground. Our scanners won't be able to sense it."

Orlo went into a nearby house, inspecting it. There was something out of place, he just couldn't put a finger on it. It dawned on him, *If everyone went to hide in underground bunkers, then why does it appear that nothing has been touched?*

"I don't think that's it General, with all due respect," he said, his scanners searching.

"What do you mean Sergeant?" the General asked, confused, "There can be no other explanation. There is no way they escaped the city."

Orlo shook his head, "That's not what I mean. Look around, nothing's been touched. If they were led underground, they would've at least brought provisions to survive. But nothing's out of place in any of the houses we searched through."

The General paused for a second, considering his words, "You may have a point there Sergeant. What do you think happened to them?"

"I'm not sure," he replied, exiting the house, "but whatever it was, it wasn't good."

Mishti raced through the empty streets towards the communication tower. If she could set up a false signal by decrypting their messaging system, she'd be able to prevent any outsiders from attacking the city. She teamed up with Roso's platoon, who had superior technical skills. They were perfect for taking out the tower. She had gathered a lot of valuable tech over the years, especially Corvan, and hoped that she would be able to make the difference in the final battle.

The communication tower was heavily guarded, with more than a thousand soldiers stationed there.

"Roso," she said as they opened fire at her, "I need you to distract them while I enter from above."

He nodded back at her, unleashing the missiles from his Leviathans, "C'mon men! Let us taste victory!"

Colonel Hughes's battalion had accompanied Mishti and Roso, ensuring their victory. Major Prida and Lieutenant Colonel Gioke were commanding several companies, all pushing against the communications tower. The early morning sky lit up with fiery explosion.

Mishti flew high into the air, above the communications tower. She landed on the roof of the building and unleashed a high tension explosion, collapsing part of the roof.. She dropped onto the top floor of the building, which was empty. She switched visions in her Leviathan to pinpoint high electrical energy. A few floors down, large energies were sending messages to the satellite atop the roof. She flew to an elevator shaft and descended down to the room she was looking for.

Gunfire erupted at her, filling the room with smoke. No bullet

reached her, as an electromagnetic shield flowed over her Leviathan. It was the same generator that she had picked up from her last battle, with a few modifications of course. She stepped forward out of the smoke. The soldiers in the room weren't wearing Leviathans and were absolutely petrified.

Mishti studied them all; she didn't want to kill them unguarded. She pushed a small button from her wrist, which sent dozens of small circular balls into the air. When they touched the soldiers, they collapsed onto the ground.

Mishti grinned. She had developed that weapon herself. It overrided the human nervous system and forced a person into mandatory unconsciousness. She had originally developed it to help pacify people who were in shock. It seemed to have other uses though. She looked at the nearby computers. All of them seemed to control sending messages in and out of the city.

She hesitated; she didn't want to get out of her Leviathan. The building could collapse at any time, and she didn't want to get trapped inside. Her hands were too thick inside her Leviathan to work on the keyboard, though. She scanned the room for remote access. If she could remotely control one of the computers through her Leviathan, then she wouldn't have to worry.

The room had several wireless routers to boost connection. She smiled as her Leviathan worked on hacking into the Corvan router.

Roso shouted to her through her comms, "We're taking heavy fire out here! How much longer are you going to be?"

"I can't rush these things Roso, hold out a little longer."

"It's not me I'm worried about! A few rogue explosions will bring

that tower down! Whatever you're doing, do it quickly! I don't know how much more it can take!"

"Affirmative," she replied, "I'll go as fast as I can."

She sighed, no one on her team understood hacking. Telling her to go faster wouldn't magically make her hack the systems faster. As it was, she was trying to brute force her way in. That could take hours if she was unlucky.

As luck would have it, it only took her a few more minutes before she was inside their routers. *Their firewalls must've been absolute garbage*, she thought as she took control of a nearby computer. She studied the UI for sending messages back and forth. It seemed every message was heavily encrypted. That wasn't good. Unlike the routers, she wouldn't be able to brute force her way in. She browsed through the various computer screens, hoping one of the officers would have been lax enough to save the encryption key to her computer.

She got lucky again. She entered the encryption key as she sent out her message.

"Attention all units outside of Jindel. The battle is over, we have won. I repeat, the battle is over, we have won. King Forsigth destroyed the Iranian forces in one fell swoop. No assistance is required. Return to your posts."

That would prevent any soldiers from coming to Jindel. She had essentially won the war. There was no way that the Corvans would be able to win. She heard shouting in her comms.

"Get out of there now! I repeat, get out of there now! The building is about to collapse!"

Mishti watched in surprise as the building started to collapse around

her. There was no way that she would be able to escape. She activated her shields as rubble fell upon her and the building collapsed.

Ceri fired round after round with her railgun rifle that Mishti had crafted for her, targeting heavily armored Corvan units. Her platoon protected her, each of them outfitted with similar modifications that she had ordered for all of them. They were a well oiled machine, and they protected their mistress well. Ceri would have trusted each one of her soldiers with her life, and they did not let her down.

Her soldiers were enamored with her fiery attitude, and teased her often. She hated them for that. She was not some doll that was supposed to be looked at. She was a soldier and a strong woman, and she resented anyone who treated her differently.

“Sergeant,” one of her soldiers asked, “when this battle is over, will you marry me?”

She grinned, this was her fifth marriage proposal during the battle, “I’ll tell you what, Corporal Hart. If you can beat me in a fight, I’d be more than happy to marry you.”

The soldier groaned through his comms, none of her soldiers could beat her. There was a reason why Jago had chosen her to be part of his Company. Her strength matched her fiery spirit, and she was not easily beaten. She may have been the youngest soldier in the Company, only nineteen years old, but she could beat anyone outside of the Company with ease. She was gifted.

A powerful rifle shot hit her in her back right shoulder. She turned around and fired at the enemy. Her round flew right through his suit.

“Now, is that any way to treat a lady?” she said as he dropped to the

ground.

Her soldiers cheered for her, loving her even more. Ceri smiled, it was great to be queen of these men.

Bors flew through the battlefield with his soldiers, which he called Grund's Greatest. Each one of the twenty soldiers in his platoon had a color coded Leviathan and joined his antics to do crazy poses and shout nonsense at the enemy.

"Grund's Greatest Platoon, Formation One!" he shouted as he cleared an area around him and landed.

He stuck his hands straight into the air as his soldiers landed next to him, doing the same. They formed half of a sun with their hands sticking out in the air, completely exposed. A large explosion erupted behind them. Bors had a flair for the extreme.

The Corvan units looked at them in confusion. What were they trying to do. Bors rolled forward and pointed his hand at a Corvan officer.

"It's time for you to bask in the fists of twenty suns!" he shouted as his men moved forward.

Each one of them punched the officer once, with Bors punching him last, breaking his Leviathan apart. They all started cheering. The move was executed perfectly. They all posed at the end, with Bors sticking his hands out behind him.

"It looks like he's had a little too much sun. Come on guys, let's show them how the Grund's Greatest fight."

The Corvans continued to look perplexed. They had never fought

anything like that before. It was as if every move they did was choreographed beforehand. Bors swept his arms in a wide circle as he thrust his hands into the air.

“Hyper Sword, activate!”

Two small swords shot up into the air and combined in midair. Bors did a flip and landed on one knee, “Hyper Sword, activated!”

His soldiers did something similar, each one wielding a different type of weapon. The Corvan soldiers around them started to back away.

“Soldiers!” Bors shouted, “Attack!”

They moved like a dance, flowing with each other, taking down unit after unit. There was a methodology to their madness, and none of the enemy soldiers could touch them. They moved like a whirlwind, sweeping everyone in their path. They were unstoppable.

Suddenly, a large explosion toppled them. A large tank stood in their path, at least twenty meters tall. No one had been killed in the explosion, but it did surprise them.

“That thing is a monster,” Bors said as he studied it, “We have to take it down. Come on men, let’s make a monster of our own.” He slammed both hands on the ground, “Dragon mode, Activate!”

His soldiers piled on top of Bors, and their Leviathans started to transform. He had Iranian engineers craft something special for their Leviathans. Each one of them were connected. They rose from the ground in a giant metallic dragon, with a cockpit of twenty. The controls were overly complicated and dramatic. But they thrived on it. They were the only platoon in the world that could operate something like the dragon.

“Dragon mode, Activated!” They all shouted as they emerged as a forty meter tall Dragon. It roared in the sky. The tank fired at it, not even scratching it. It roared and anger and shot white hot fire out of its mouth. The tank melted under the fervent heat. The Iranian soldiers cheered around them. No one could stop Grund’s Greatest.

Shado tore her way through soldier after soldier with her twin phase swords. Her Nightmare Leviathan gleamed in terror at her opponents. It was as if she hardly moved at all, she moved so fast. None of her opponents seemed to know that she had killed them. Her mind was far from the battlefield, remembering her childhood.

She had been born and raised for one purpose, to be the best assassin who had ever lived. She had endured much cruelty and conditioning in her youth for that sole purpose. Her father saw her as no more than a tool for him. She had hated her father. She could barely control herself as she thought of him. She had thrown away her father’s reason for living when she decided to join the army.

Her father had died in the Corvan invasion as well, like so many others. It was when she saw his broken body that she first felt free. But she knew nothing else but how to kill, which is why she joined the army. They would find a use for her when she could not.

It had been over five years since then, and she had learned much from her companions. For the first time in her life, she was able to feel more than just cold hatred for someone. She felt like she belonged. For the first time since being alive, she knew what it was like to have a friend. She had learned compassion and empathy for others. From Jago, she was beginning to learn mercy.

She flew above a squad of Corvan Leviathans, landing behind them. She cut with fury, each slice more deadly than the last. She did not look back, did not worry about what she had done. None could touch her. She was truly a nightmare.

Tyrn and Jago raced up the crystal palace steps, inching closer towards the throne room. Tyrn was breathing hard, everything they've been working for, it all led to that moment. The future was so close that she could almost taste it. Jago roared with determination and resolve. He was not going to lose.

As they reached the top of the stairs in front of the palace, four Leviathans flew in front of them. A small symbol on their chest marked them as the royal guard. Jago was expecting this, Edaj would have been well protected.

Tyrn fired a shot from her rifle, hitting one in the shoulder. She looked at Jago and waved him forward.

“GO!” she commanded, “I’ll hold these four off! You have to stop him!”

Jago hesitated; he didn’t want to leave Tyrn behind. These men would be extremely talented, though he doubted they would have any knowledge of Ti.

“GO!” Tyrn shouted again, “I can handle this! End this now, for all of us!”

Jago nodded at her; he had to trust her. She was more reliable than anyone else that he knew. She would be able to handle herself.

The four guards flew towards the palace doors to prevent Jago from

entering. Jago grunted in irritation. He had no time to deal with them. He clapped both hands together as sparks flew from them and pushed his hands outward, creating a shockwave that sent the four flying.

He looked back at Tyrn, “I leave them with you, then.”

She nodded back as Jago went through the giant palace doors. The four palace guards regrouped, insistent on following after Jago. Tyrn barred their entrance; she would not let them through.

She pointed her rifle at the four of them, ready to fire. At once they all charged her, each with a phase sword in hand. It seemed that none of them had any ranged weapons. Tyrn tensed up; she could use that to her advantage.

She fired on the one closest to her with her rifle, sending him backwards. They had strong armor. Her shot had done nothing against him. The second reached her and sliced at her with his phase sword. Tyrn dropped to the ground and fired at him, hitting him directly in the chest. He too soared backwards, seemingly unhurt.

Tyrn grinned; this battle was going to be harder than she thought. The last two approached her together, flying fast. Tyrn shot at the two, her rifle didn't do anything against them. They flew close to her and soared above, completely ignoring her. They didn't have time to deal with her; they had to protect the king.

Tyrn looked at them in surprise as she realized what they were trying to do. She pushed a button on her forearm that shot out a drone. the drone then shot six little balls out and leaned against the palace door. A purple electromagnetic barrier covered the door, preventing the two from entering. The two royal guards looked down at her.

Tyrn was breathing heavily, “That's right. You won't be able to save

him unless you get through me. The only way to disable that barrier is to destroy my Leviathan.”

The two dropped down to her and were soon joined by the other two. They approached her slowly, determined. Tyrn gritted her teeth, her rifle switching between the four. Her heart was pounding; she couldn't let those four past her. Her battle had just begun.

Chapter 28

*I watched in horror as I
realized what had
happened to them. What
kind of monster would do
that to his own people?*

- Orlo Goff: Iratian Sergeant

As Jago walked into the throne room, he knew something was wrong immediately. A powerful black aura surrounded Edaj Forsigth and flowed out of him like fog. The palace floor was covered in that black aura. Jago had never felt something like that before; it was much more powerful than he expected. He walked slowly towards Edaj Forsigth, cautious.

Edaj Forsigth was not wearing a Leviathan, but rather was dressed in his typical royal regalia. He truly did look like a lion sitting on his throne, ready to pounce on his prey. He smiled maliciously as Jago approached him.

“I was wondering when you would come, boy.” He said, his tone mocking. “As you can tell, you stand no chance against me.”

His bright golden eyes were alarmingly bright, as if they were almost glowing. In fact, it was as if his whole face was glowing. His skin was pale, almost pure white. He looked majestic, yet also unworldly.

Jago continued to walk forward, more than a little worry. Edaj was holding as much Ti as a whole city. He had never even seen his master wield that kind of power. Edaj pointed at him.

“You’re a very insolent boy,” he said, his voice twisted, “Didn’t

your parents teach you to bow before royalty?”

Jago watched in horror as his body was wrapped up in the black aura across the palace floor. It was Tō, a manifestation of someone's will like he had never felt before. His body moved against his wishes until he was on his knees, his head bowed. Jago struggled to move, but couldn't. *What kind of power does he possess?* Jago wondered as he struggled.

Edaj stood and the pressure holding Jago increased ten fold. He walked towards Jago, each step creating a small quake.

“This will not be a fight, as you had hoped,” he said as he loomed over Jago, “but an execution.”

A black curved blade formed in Edaj's right hand, twisted and demented. It looked like a bone but with a sharp edge.

“You've committed many atrocities against the Kingdom of Corva,” he declared as he held the blade above Jago's neck, “As king, it is my duty to judge you for these crimes.”

Jago struggled to move; he couldn't die like this, without even a fight. His body wouldn't move. It felt like the Axial was crushing his skin.

“The accused Jago Yen Kale kneels before me in trial for his crimes against Corva,” he stated as if reciting a ritual, “In lieu of a Bailiff, I will state your crimes.”

His tone was mocking, and gloried in his mock trial. “The first crime is the murder of several Corvan civilians, which due to the sheer number of them, cannot all be stated at this time.”

Jago wracked his brains on what he could do to escape. If he tried to

call Shin Kyō, would certainly stop him. There had to be something he could do.

“The second offense is the learning of forbidden techniques, whose powers are dark and evil. This witchcraft must not go unpunished.”

Jago grunted in frustration. He could barely breathe. Escaping from his suit would be impossible. He struggled to speak and failed.

“Your third offense is your most egregious. You stand accused of murdering the heir to the throne, the prince of Corva, the Emerald Tiger, Lynn Forsigh. Have you nothing to say in defense?”

Jago gritted his teeth, Edaj was reveling in this. He didn’t know that Jago had kept Lynn alive. If Jago told him, he might hesitate. He just needed one chance to escape.

“Since you have made no reply, your defense rests. As king of Corva, I find you guilty of the crimes accused. The only penalty suitable for such atrocities is death.”

Jago fought with all his willpower to say, “Alpha Gear, activate,” in barely more than a whisper.

His computer responded at once, “Alpha Gear, activated.”

The crimson and white flaps on the back of the Leviathan started to move from their downwards facing position to form eight rays in a circle. They pulled slightly out as the black aura started to get pulled into the back of the Axial, and the Axial started to glow all over in golden light.

Power surged into Jago’s body and time slowed. Edaj’s blade moved like a snail closer to his neck. Edaj’s face slowly transformed into shock as Jago jumped backwards. Edaj’s blade hit the floor of the

crystal palace, cracking the ground beneath him.

“How?” Edaj demanded as he saw Jago jump back.

Jago clapped both hands together and surrounded his body in Shin Kyō, his power increasing exponentially. His gold aura transformed into white, filling the palace. As he did so, he gasped in surprise. He could feel what comprised the black aura of the palace.

Orlo studied the rooms more closely, looking for anything. There was some sort of residue on the ground in each of the houses, a gray dust. It was part of the puzzle, but he couldn't figure it out. He looked towards the palace. It swirled with white and black energy. The battle between Edaj and Jago had started. He focused back on the rooms again. He analyzed the components of the dust with his Leviathan and his blood turned to ice. He retched inside his suit. It couldn't be possible.

He turned his comms, “General, this is Sergeant Goff. You're never going to believe what I've discovered about the citizens here.”

Jago almost vomited. Edaj disgusted him. No wonder he was so powerful. It was as if he were wielding the power of 100,000 all at the same time.

“What did you do to them?!” Jago demanded, his fists clenched in fury.

Edaj chuckled, “Whatever do you mean Captain Kale? Amazed at

the power you feel?”

“Don’t give me that crap!” Jago shouted, “The people, what did you do to them?!”

Edaj stared at Jago, his face cold, “Don’t presume anything Jago. These people are mine. They would gladly give their lives for the throne.”

“You psychopath! You turned them all into energy!” Jago shouted, his voice barely under control. Edaj was a true monster.

Edaj’s black blade dissipated. His face was calm, collected, “A mere handful compared to the number you have killed yourself. They will have served their country well.”

“How many?!” Jago demanded, “How many?!”

Edaj grinned, “Enough. The Shin Kyō allows us to use everything as a source of Ti. Under the amount of Ti I’m wielding, they all disintegrated, unable to cope with my power.”

“You call me a monster yet I didn’t kill a single one of your soldiers when you returned, including Lynn. He still lives! There’s no way he’d ever return to you now after what you’ve done here.”

The black aura that had crushed Jago returned. Edaj was furious.

“LIES!” He shouted, “I SAW HIS BODY! HE BARELY LOOKED HUMAN!!”

Jago struggled and was able to move. The power of his Shin Kyō with the Alpha Gear proved to be a match for Edaj’s power.

“Think Again! You can feel that I’m telling you the truth! Accept it!”

Edaj lifted his hand screaming, “NO!!! IT CAN’T BE TRUE!!!”

Half of the crystal palace blew apart in black flames. The soldiers stopped fighting to watch. It was amazing. The shards of crystal fell from the sky in incandescent beauty.

“On behalf of the people of Jindel, no on behalf of the people of the world, I won’t let you get away with this!” Jago shouted, the area around him transforming white.

Edaj calmed himself and posed in a fighting position, “It doesn’t matter if he’s alive or dead! It doesn’t matter whether all the people are dead or not. I will start my new world order! I will bathe the world with the blood of the people! You are just an insect in my path!”

They ran at each other, each a titan.

Mishti slowly arose from the rubble on top of her. She had survived. Roso pulled her out of the debris. She was exhausted. His helmet was off. He looked at her, his eyes concerned.

“Thanks Roso,” she said as she leaned against him, her body weak.

“Don’t try to move so much,” Roso commanded, “You’ve got a few broken bones.”

Mishti nodded, grateful. She felt so weak, as if someone was sapping her energy away from her.

“I shouldn’t feel tired. What’s going on?” she asked as she looked up towards Roso.

Roso jerked his head to the palace, black and white light escaping from it, “I feel it too. I think it’s their battle. It’s affecting us all.”

Mishti looked towards the palace. *The final battle*, she thought, *Jago has to win.*

Their fists collided in midair, shattering the ground around them. Shards of crystal flew into the air. Their punches were equal, both were wielding the same amount of power. They pushed each other back to the ends of the throne room. Jago jumped off of one of the high walls and twirled in a flip back to the ground, landing on his feet. Edaj landed and was forced to kneel.

He looked up at Jago, his eyes enraged, “You’re far more talented than I thought. To be able to use Shin Kyō with such proficiency,” he sneered, “You truly are Roken’s apprentice.”

Jago took a deep breath. Edaj was truly amazing. It was incredible that he could use so much Ti without burning up. Roken warned him not to use Shin Kyō too much, but it didn’t seem to be affecting Edaj at all. He truly was terrifying. Just to fight on an even level with him, he had to use both a Leviathan and Alpha Gear. If it weren’t for those, he’d be nothing more than a buzzing fly compared to Edaj.

Jago grinned, his emotions concealed, “You should really save the praise for yourself. You’re fighting me without a Leviathan and on equal footing too.”

Edaj stood and started to laugh. He slowly walked towards Jago. Jago hesitated, before walking towards Edaj.

“Equals?” He dropped his laugh, his eyes furious, “Don’t be conceited boy!”

Jago dropped into a fighting stance, unsure of whether Edaj was going to attack. His laugh unnerved him. Edaj moved in a blur, closing the distance between them, and struck out with his right elbow.

Had Jago not been in Alpha Gear, he wouldn’t have been able to see Edaj’s strike. As it was, he barely had time to dodge it as he struck out with a left hook. Edaj was too fast for him. He easily dodged Jago’s punch and returned with a roundhouse kick to Jago’s face. Jago had no time to block and was sent flying into the air.

The Axial sustained heavy damage to its face area. Jago was knocked out of breath. *How can one kick do so much damage?* he thought as he saw Edaj fly through the air after him. *I had Kan up the entire time.*

Edaj flew underneath Jago and kicked him higher into the air. Jago crashed through the roof of the palace, into the morning sky. The Axial had cracked in several places. He could barely think coherently.

Edaj studied his prey. Jago was strong, but he was still inexperienced compared to him. He clapped both hands together, and purple sparks shot from his hands. Jago was still careening in the air. Edaj formed a circle with his hands at Jago, his mind furious and calm.

“Tora no Tiken,” he said as an emerald beam shot out of his hands, swirling with purple electricity.

The shock wave from the force of the beam collapsed the rest of the palace. The soldiers looked in wonder as the beam consumed Jago, its width at least 20 meters. Black billowing smoke filled the morning sky. The air smelled like rain. As the smoke cleared, Jago hovered above Edaj, unharmed. He had managed to surround his body with the hardest Kan that he could.

Edaj narrowed his eyes in surprise. The boy was talented. It was amazing how much Ti he could gather with his basic understanding of Shin Kyō.

Jago shot down towards Edaj, using both his rockets and his Ti to boost his speed. He wrapped his hands in the strongest Sei that he could muster. He had to give it everything he had.

Edaj hovered in the air waiting for Jago's attack. To him, it seemed as if Jago moved slowly, even though he had surpassed the speed of sound. The Ti he had gathered from the people of Jindel was nearly limitless. There was none who could match his power. He dodged Jago's punch as he whizzed past him.

Jago had been anticipating Edaj's reaction. He pushed his back rockets at the last second, and his missed punch struck Edaj right in the face.

Edaj's eyes bulged in surprise as he was knocked back, across the city into a nearby building. His body made a large thud as his body implanted into the wall. He could hardly move his body. He spat up blood. He looked at Jago with murder in his eyes. He had been injured. That runt had actually managed to damage him. The last person to do that was Roken Jiryuku.

Jago seized his advantage and rushed at Edaj, covering his right hand in Tō. He struck out at Edaj and a giant electric blue dragon erupted from his hand.

“Hikari no Ryu Ken,” Jago stated as the dragon swallowed up Edaj and the building. The building disintegrated under the pressure and Edaj flew backwards, his body wracked with pain.

He stopped himself in midair with Ti, and started to breathe heavily. Sweat dropped down his face. His clothes were in tatters. The cape that he so proudly wore all but dust. No one could mock him like that! He had been turned into a fool. His body shook with rage and his aura exploded out everywhere, sweeping the city with blackness. He used Ti to heal his wounds. He would make sure that he would never be harmed again.

Jago’s white aura contended with Edaj’s black. Both pushed at each other, struggling for dominance. Jago was surprised; Edaj had healed himself quickly. It would be hard for him to do any damage against him. He just had too much Ti. He had to cut off that source. It was key to his survival.

Tyrn struggled against the four royal guards. They were phenomenal fighters and had great synchronization. It took her all just to defend against them. She was losing stamina quickly and wouldn’t be able to hold out much longer.

Once the royal guards had seen Edaj fighting, they gave up their struggle to chase after Jago. Tyrn was their only concern now. They sliced at her, each cut making a pattern. They were getting to her. It

wouldn't be too much longer before she succumbed to their attacks.

The Royal Leviathan was struggling. It had sustained numerous cuts, some of which affected critical functions of operations. This just wasn't Tyrn's fight. She wasn't a close combat fighter. She was sure that if Shado or Ben faced them, they'd have no problem defeating them. But she wasn't Shado or Ben. They moved too fast for her to shoot them, and she was running low on ammo.

She flew into the sky, trying to escape them. They followed suit, forming a diamond with their smoke trailing from their Leviathans. They had her. Tyrn released a flash grenade in desperation, encompassing the surrounding area in light.

They did not hesitate. Only great fools would be tricked by such childish tricks. Tyrn watched in surprise as one flew out of the light and slashed her across the back. She screamed in pain and careened to the ground.

The other three slashed at her likewise, each slash causing her to squeal in pain. She crashed into the ground, her mind blurry with pain. There was no way that she could beat them. She was bleeding from several wounds, none of them deep. Her mind was hazy, her breathing short. She couldn't keep it up; She was going to die.

The four royal guards landed next to her and watched the blood seep out of her Leviathan. She was no match for them. She was just a little girl, caught up in a war her father should have been in. Tears started to stream down Tyrn's face; she wasn't ready. She wasn't ready to die yet. But she could her life pouring out of her just like her blood.

She closed her eyes. The four royal guards didn't move. They had

defeated her. They thought she had died with the last attack. They may as well have been right. Tyrn could feel death start to envelop her, threatening her with a cold embrace.

Her mind floated; every second passed like an hour. Only one image floated to her head. Jago's smiling face, his sincere smile that she had only seen a few times.

Her eyes jolted open. She couldn't die there. Jago was depending on her to live. Everything they worked for, everything they fought for, it would be all for nothing if she died.

The royal guards watched in surprise as Tyrn rose from the ground. It was impossible, they had killed her. Tyrn's body shook with determination. Power swelled through her body.

They moved to attack her, each striking out at the same time. She dodged them with ease, striking back with her fists. She hit all of them simultaneously, and they were pushed back

"I'm not going down that easily!" she shouted at them.

The four looked at each other; where had she gotten the power? It was as if they were fighting an entirely new person.

Tyrn did not know where her strength came from, nor did she care. All she cared about was getting back to Jago, no matter what. She wouldn't let herself die, not before they fulfilled their dream.

They rushed her, each striking one after another. Tyrn moved like a river, dodging all of their attacks, moving along with their movements. The royal guards watched in amazement as she struck out at them like lightning. Where her rifle could do nothing against them, her fists

cracked their armor.

“What is she?!” One of them demanded as his chestpiece burst into pieces.

Tyrn followed up with her strike and knocked him to the ground. He was down. Only three left to go.

“You’ll pay for that!” Another shouted at her as he swung his sword at her.

Tyrn dodged with ease, the blade an inch away from her face. To her, they had all been moving in slow motion. The thought occurred to her, *I must have activated the Alpha Gear! After Jago’s great success, they must’ve installed it into every Leviathan!* She grinned. She would have to thank Riza for that. It even seemed like her wounds had closed!

She pushed the royal guard away with an open palm strike. He was sent backwards. His shoulder piece shattered. He grunted in pain.

“No matter how hard you strike at me,” she warned, “I can strike at you ten times stronger.”

The three looked at each other, each sweating underneath their suits. She scared them. She was so much stronger than earlier.

She rushed forward, moving in the blink of an eye. She roundhouse kicked one in the face. His suit shattered under her pressure. He was sent flying. Only two were left.

They were absolutely terrified. To them, it looked like she had supernatural powers. They had seen the King’s power firsthand and knew that they stood no chance against it. If the girl wielded even a

fraction of the power that the King held, their death was assured.

One of them took a step backwards prepared to flee. Tyrn struck out, determined not to let a single one escape. She grabbed out at his Leviathan and ripped his power orb from his suit. The royal guard was stunned. He dropped to the ground in shock, the weight of his Leviathan crushing him. Only one remained.

The last royal guard looked at Tyrn with awe. Unlike his cowardly companion; he admired her strength. She was truly amazing. He would accept his death graciously, as his code of honor dictated.

“Come,” he told her, “let us embrace death.”

Tyrn dropped her fists, “I have no desire to kill you. Surrender now, and your life will be spared.”

The guard struck out at her, his fate sealed, “I would rather die with honor than to live with such shame!”

Tyrn dodged his sword and punched at his chest. His suit crumbled in her hands. He fell lifelessly to the ground. Tyrn looked at him in disgust. There was no honor in death.

Her vision started to blur as the Alpha Gear deactivated. It had done its job, but she was still just as injured as she was earlier. She collapsed to the ground and blackness encompassed her.

Jago punched and kicked furiously at Edaj, trying to land a punch. Edaj was too skilled. Although he could no longer dodge Jago’s punches and kicks with ease, he could still block them. The battle had

begun to suck out his enormous power that he had gathered. He struggled to grab more from the earth. It seemed that Jago was using it all.

Edaj kicked at Jago, hitting him in the chest. The blow didn't hurt Jago as much as it did earlier. It was as he thought, Edaj couldn't hold all the power in. It was slowly leaking out of the black aura that he protruded.

Jago redoubled with determination; he could win. He just had to beat him out.

General Tomath looked at the two Behemoths battling in the sky. It was as if there were no other people but them.

A soldier approached him, Colonel Hughes. He saluted at him.

"Sir," he addressed.

Tomath nodded at him, "At ease Colonel. What news do you have for me?"

Colonel Hughes grinned, "We've won sir. The enemy has been crushed."

Tomath looked at him, "That is good news. They are the only two left fighting?"

Colonel Hughes nodded, "As far as I can tell, yes. But there's more sir."

Tomath raised his eyebrows, "More Colonel. What could be more

than victory?”

“The soldiers,” he said grabbing Tomath’s arm, “they’re all alive. There’s not been a single casualty.”

General Tomath smiled, “That is excellent news. Then the Alpha Gear worked, I take it?”

Hughes nodded, “Yes. It worked better than we could have ever expected. The injured got up and fought back with ten times as much strength.”

“Remind me to promote Riza when we get back, Colonel,” Tomath said.

Hughes saluted, “Yes sir!”

He left General Tomath standing there. General Tomath looked back up at the fantastic battle. He grinned. He did it. Jago would be able to fight with full purpose knowing that not a single person died. *It’s all up to you now, kiddo.*

Jago fought with fervor, determined to wear down on Edaj’s Ti supply. Edaj; however, was wary of Jago and fought to conserve his energy. They careened across the sky, their blows as loud as thunder.

Edaj was getting desperate. He wouldn’t be able to keep up his pace for much longer without giving Jago the advantage. He clapped both hands together and pushed out. Jago was sent flying backwards.

He looked at Edaj with determination, that move was used to push

enemies away when you get overwhelmed. He was getting to him.

Jago watched as Edaj concentrated his aura around him, completely cascading his body with black light. Jago recognized what Edaj was doing immediately and followed to do the same. His white aura concentrated inside him. He saw Edaj's body surround itself in Kan. His fists glowed with Tō, his feet with Sei. This would be it. The final attack.

Edaj moved in a flash, his body breaking the sound barrier several times over. Jago did the same.

They reappeared in front of each other, a black tiger surrounding Edaj, a silver dragon surrounding Jago.

They struck out at each other, the dragon and the tiger colliding in midair.

“TETSU RYU KEN!!!” Jago shouted as the dragon leapt forward out of him.

“KOKU TORA KEN!!!” Edaj shouted back as the black tiger soared from his body.

An explosion of black and white light shook the sky. The windows in the buildings in the city shattered. The soldiers collapsed onto the ground from the tremblings their blow had.

Jago was sent flying to the ground, Edaj into the air. As Jago landed, he concentrated all his Ti into his hands and feet. He jumped back towards Edaj, flying through the sky.

Edaj did likewise, pushing off the sky with his feet. They screamed

towards each other.

“SHIN MAN KEN!!!” They shouted in unison as their fists collided.

Thousands of their punches met at once, each blow matching the other. At the 10,000th blow, they flew back, Jago back to the ground, Edaj back into the air.

As Jago landed, he clapped both hands together and moved his arms in a circle, finishing with his hands forming a circle above his stomach. White lightning shot from his body as a blue orb of plasma formed in his hands. He looked up at Edaj, whose body was flowing with black electricity. A green orb of plasma in his hands.

Jago thrust his hands out at Edaj, his hands forming a triangle. His eyes were brighter than ever, everything was in this last attack.

“MUGEN TENSATSU SOKEN!!!!!!” He shouted as an enormous electric blue beam shot out of his hands, a hundred meters wide.

The ground in the entire city cracked underneath the pressure of the beam.

“MUGEN YAMI ANSATSUKEN!!!” Edaj roared as an emerald beam shot out of his hands, slightly larger than Jago’s.

Chapter 29

*The Seal had been broken;
their power had been
unleashed, as it was
foretold. They weren't
prepared to wield it.*

- The Celestial Guardian

Their beams collided in midair, the shockwave of it destroying all the buildings in the city. Their beams struggled for dominance. The center of the beams inched closer to Jago. He was losing.

There has to be some limit to his power, Jago thought as he struggled to regain his lost ground. His stores of Ti that he had gathered from the earth were beginning to wane. His body wouldn't be able to handle the power for much longer. *There must be something I can do!*

Edaj laughed maniacally. The boy stood no chance against him. What was the power of 100,000 compared to one? He concentrated more Ti into his attack. The center of the beams pushed closer towards Jago.

“DIE JAGO KALE, DIE!!!!” he shouted as the beams inched closer to Jago.

Jago's arms were burning. He had to start using his own supply of Ti. And the Sen had a great toll on him. It was all he could do just to hold on.

Tyrn awoke from unconsciousness. She struggled to get up. All of the Royal Leviathan systems were down. Her body ached all over. Her

head was burning. She pushed the release button near her thigh and dropped out of the Royal. She collapsed to the ground.

She looked to where Jago was and saw him struggling. She couldn't give up, not while he still struggled. She rose to her knees, her face drenched with blood and sweat. She slowly stood.

“Jago,” she muttered as she took her first step towards him.

She stumbled and took another step forward.

“Jago,” she repeated as she inched closer to him.

She took another step forward, her strength returning to her. Her stumbled walk broke into a jog, and then into a run, and then into a sprint. She sprinted towards him, her heart leaping out to him. Suddenly she was right by him.

“JAGO!!!” she shouted.

Jago looked at Tyrn in surprise, her body covered in blood and bruises.

“DO IT!!!!” she shouted at him.

Jago was shocked, but nodded. She was still there for him, even until the end. Suddenly, thousands of voices joined hers.

“DO IT JAGO!!!!” they shouted.

Everyone was depending on them, he couldn't let them down. Though his arms burned as if on fire, he could not give up! Every man had a weakness! And Edaj Forsigh was just as much a man as he was! He was not God, try as he might.

The words of his Master echoed in his ears, “What is the largest concern when dealing with any of these?”

Jago remembered what he had said, “Sen. User Transference. All of these uses of Ti cost the user a certain percentage of their total energy.”

His answer, his way of beating Edaj rested with Sen. He knew that, but how? How could he use that to his advantage?

He remembered what his master said, “Yes, Jago. That is correct. You don’t have to bear the burden alone anymore. The final secret of the Mugen Shinzo Ken, the Shin Kyō, shares this burden with the people around you. The very earth becomes your medium. No longer do you have to be burdened with saving the world. This power, which has been passed down for over a thousand years, comes from everyone. The Divine Strength, is everyone here on Earth, for they are an extension of yourself.”

His eyes opened wide with realization. Everyone was part of Shin Kyō, including Edaj, especially Edaj. If he could use his power against him, he was sure to win.

The beam inched dangerously close to him. He could feel the heat of it threatening to destroy him. *Not yet, I’m not finished yet!* His mind stretched out to Edaj, and he could feel it. Edaj’s power pulling into his own. If he could shift his Shin Kyō just to use Edaj’s Ti, he would win.

Something connected, clicked and Jago knew he had succeeded. Power like he never before had felt surged into him, Edaj’s power. He pushed the Ti he was wielding into his beam. The beam quadrupled in size. It changed color from blue to white.

Jago pushed forward, “MY POWER IS YOUR POWER!!”

Edaj watched in horror as his beam was swallowed up by Jago’s

enormous one, “What’s this?! My power, It’s gone! That’s Impossible!!”

“NO! EVERYONE’S POWER IS MY POWER!!!” Jago shouted, the beam swallowing up Edaj.

“MUGEN SHINZO KEN HIDDEN TECHNIQUE!!!! MUGEN TENSATSU TEKIKEN!!!!!!!!!!”

Edaj started to disintegrate, his body overcome by the beam, “NO!! I AM INVINCIBLE...”

The beam shot through the sky, blowing through the clouds and into space. Jago collapsed on the ground. He had done it. He had won.

Chapter 30

*The War was finally over.
Not only did I grasp my
dreams, but I reached
beyond them.*

- Jago Kale: Iratian Civilian

Jago stood outside the palace in Atoli. Crowds surrounded the palace, all clamoring for him. He was dressed in his best imperial uniform. Next to him, Tyrn stood, her injuries healed. It had been two weeks since the fateful battle of Jindel.

The Irati Empire was in full control of Corva and had established a good man for king over there. Many Iratian citizens were helping the Corvans, providing them the relief they needed. The day the war ended, Irati had been in an uproar. Enemies broke their hatred towards each other, new bonds were formed, new love blossomed. The country was in a state of absolute jubilation. Many tears of joy were shed. The dead from the war could finally be rest in peace.

Jago and Tyrn were directed inside the palace and told to wait outside the throne room. They were both going to be given the highest medals of honor for their service in the empire. Jago knew that they would have to wait a little while so he seized his opportunity. He grabbed Tyrn's hands.

"Tyrn, throughout all of this, you've always been by my side; you've always been there for me, no matter how difficult I was," he said as he stared into her sky blue eyes. Tyrn nodded back, her eyes lit with anticipation.

"You've been more than just my partner, you've been my best

friend. I couldn't imagine my life without you." He took a necklace out of his pocket. It was simple, but it held an emerald gem.

"Nor do I want to imagine a life without you. You're everything to me, the reason I get up in the morning and care about the world. I love you," It was the first time he had said those words.

Tyrn started to blush, her eyes ready, "I love you too Jago, more than you could ever know."

Jago grinned, "I'd like to continue our journey not as partners or even friends, but as husband and wife." He held the necklace in both hands out in front of him, customary of how the Irati ask for marriage.

"If you'd be willing, will you marry me?" he said, his eyes never breaking contact.

Even though Tyrn was prepared for the question, she was still speechless. She had dreamed for this moment, but it seemed like it would never come. All she could do was say, "Yes," breathlessly.

Jago pulled her in as he placed the necklace on her. Tyrn seized the opportunity and they broke into a kiss. They stood there for a moment, the world theirs alone.

Finally, they broke apart and Jago and Tyrn held each other close. Jago was smiling brighter than she had ever seen him. He was finally at peace.

A few minutes passed, and they were ushered into the throne room, the walls and floor lined with crimson and white. The symbol of the eagle was everywhere, including the throne. The emperor sat there, an eagle baton in his hand. Every noble in the country was in attendance, as well as all of General Tomath's men, including his. Even Riza was in attendance, the lapels on her shoulder indicating that she was the lead

engineer in the army. She smiled at them, her eyes excited.

Fanfare started to play as the emperor stood and Tyrn and Jago walked forward. Everyone was called to attention, their eyes all directed at the emperor. Jago and Tyrn walked with poise across the crimson carpet towards the emperor. Jago noticed some cameras in the room, they were being broadcast everywhere. He doubted many would miss it.

At length they reached the emperor and kneeled, his face full of youth and duty. He was a good man but susceptible to manipulation. Jago thought that if it hadn't been for General Tomath, he'd be overrun by the bureaucrats.

The emperor touched both of their shoulders with his baton, "Stand," he commanded.

They stood immediately. He placed his baton on the throne and picked up a box with two medals inside. He took one out and pinned it on Tyrn.

"Lieutenant Tyrn Ridner, for your exceptional service to the Everlasting Empire, I grant you the Crimson Eagle." It was the highest honor, there was no higher honor.

He took out two medals and pinned them on Jago, "Captain Jago Kale, the Empire is in your debt. You have saved this nation and brought peace to these lands. For this great service, you will also be awarded the Crimson Eagle," it shone brightly on his chest, "However, I with my advisors, have decided to create an honor in special respect for you. You have been granted the Crimson Dragon, the medal that shall only be awarded for saving the nation in a time of great crisis."

As he finished placing the metals on them, he took his baton and held it high into the air. They turned and faced the audience. Everyone

started to bow before them. Tyrn and Jago looked at each other, both smiling. Their new future had begun.

THE END